



Playing Favorites

James 2:1-13 | Sermon

It's been a few weeks due to ACL and a retreat I took last week. So happy to be back with you. Sunday gatherings are such a grace, such a need in the Christian life. We're moving into chapter two in the very practical book of wisdom, James. We are going to receive some challenging teaching. When this happens it's human nature to do one of two things: 1) Condemn yourself and spin your wheels, that's weak pride. 2) Defend yourself and make no progress, that's strong pride. James says God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Let's take the middle path of humility, where God's grace flows toward us in his words. Remember, his words are a law of liberty; they set us free.

Playing Favorites

James opens chapter two with his main point for this section: **"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."** This is second of only two times that James mentions Jesus. We'll come back to Jesus. Here's the main point: **Faith in the Lord of Glory leads to less favoritism and more loving engagement with the poor.** He's appealing to the churches as a family, he says "my brothers". But, if we treat the church as an insular community, meant to meet all our relational needs, we make it *more* than a family; we make it a god. Families don't make good gods. In a family, people live close enough to one another to get their feelings hurt. James recognizes a hurtful trend in the early church, *partiality*. The word means, "to receive the face." The idea is taking people at face value. You look at them and immediately begin making judgments: "She's fake. He's a loser. They're no fun. That person isn't deep, mature." As non-judgmental as we'd like to think we are, even Austinites judge. We make judgments based on appearance—socially, culturally, even spiritually. I've been doing this with a whole group of people. Ever since I moved to South Austin, I've tried to engage the local spots. There's this coffee shop that I just can't stand. It's weird. The layout is odd, the coffee is bad, but more than that I just get a weird vibe from the people. I don't like them. They are kind of shifty. I prefer the Medici crowd, better coffee, cleaner people. I have my favorites. So do you. This week I met up with a friend who has lived in our area much longer and knows the coffee shop better. I told him I feel like everyone there is playing Dungeons and Dragons or something. Then, he pointed out that a lot of addicts in recovery hang out there. Knife to the heart. I superficially judged people who actually need deep healing grace. I played favorites. Who do you favor? *Fortunately, God does not play favorites.* Throughout the OT, he is described as an impartial God: **For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.** (Deut 10:17-19). A sojourner is a stranger. We are prone to size up strangers and accept, pursue, or dismiss. God never does this. He doesn't receive the face; he looks at the heart. Impartiality originates with God. James is saying God's refusal to play favorites should continue with those who hold faith in the Lord Jesus. Why? Because we are joined to the **Lord of Glory**. We're back to Jesus. The word glory uniquely appears as a modifier to "the Lord Jesus Christ." Why is it here? Glory is the creative, generous, effulgent power of

Jesus. As the Lord of glory, he summoned DNA and circumstances that would create people of every kind, ethnically, socially, culturally, which accounts for the rich diversity of people and cultures in the world. In having a Lord of glory, rather than the Lord of one nation, we have a basis for valuing social and cultural diversity. Christians, of all people, should be impartial, soul deep not skin deep in our judgments. It is also interesting that, by contrast, the church was doing the opposite—assigning glory to the rich. They were being exclusive. We're meant to be generous and impartial like our Lord. **Faith in the Lord of Glory leads to less favoritism and more loving engagement with the poor.**

Rich & Poor

Next, James goes inside the church to the “assembly”, a gathering of the people of God. Here he gives us what is probably a generic story about a real problem in the church. A rich visitor and a poor visitor enter the gathering. Christians judge them by the face, by looking at the kind of clothing they wear. The Christians favor the well dressed instead of the shabbily dressed. They demean the poor man. [remember to take the middle path] Do you ever do this? Make a b-line for people you know, people you like or are drawn to. Their clothing signals something to you. Maybe the hipster, the young, the parents, the intellectual, the spiritual? Or do you go out of your way to show hospitality and love to those who are different and new? James takes it further when he says: “[have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?](#)” (2:4). Woah, I was just sizing people up. Actually, you may have been making distinctions. The word “distinctions” is the same word from chapter one “double-minded,” the person who makes “divided judgments” about others. Some they accept; others they reject. You're worth my time, and you're not. They are actually discriminating between **cliques**, dividing people up into groups you prefer to associate with. Some of you discriminate against people you think are “less spiritual, less missional, less gospel-centered.” That is petty and unloving. **Church isn't about gathering your best friends around you; it's about a diverse community gathering around Christ.** The world can gather friends. But what makes us different? The Lord of Glory! This is why we don't do city groups by affinity or life stage. The church is a family, including the weird uncle. If you look up and all you are doing is surrounding yourself with socially comfortable, then you are divided in your judgments. Early on in my faith I decided I would spend time with the poor and the needy, that I would go out of my way to know and love people I find difficult. Know what? They taught me a lot about love and life. I'm better for it. Divided judgments divide; love unites. Now, we don't just make distinctions in cliques; we also do it in **class**. In fact, behaviors we find off-putting or different are related to social class (like my coffee shop experience). The poor may be slow to engage or ask questions or shabby (used to being put down), while the rich may glide along expecting good service (used to being on top). When I first started spending time with the poor and marginalized in our city, I was quickly confronted by my judging spirit. The homeless we fed and spent time with smelt bad, exuded very little gratitude. I wanted clean, grateful people, that's who I prefer. When I started serving at Booker T Projects, I noticed a creeping disgust with the kids who are disrespectful and disobedient. I made judgments about the poor of our city, generalizing about their irresponsibility and disrespect. But what would the impartial Judge do? He doesn't receive the face; he receives

the heart. He sees kids who have been abandoned by their parents for drugs, jail, and other families. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, loving not despising them. And he doesn't just give food; he gives love. He loves the stranger. Our perspective is all wrong. Its not coming from above: "[Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man](#)" (2:5-6). The poor are often humble and know their need. If you drive through the eastside, you'll see lots of churches. The poor aren't so proud to think they don't need a savior, so they tend to be rich in faith. If we judge them, we're the ones who are poor. Your mercy ministry is a test of your faith. Is it with the Lord of glory? Commenting on this passage Keller writes: "[James concludes that a profession of faith, unaccompanied by deeds of mercy, show that faith is 'dead', not genuine at all.](#)" Is your faith dead? Is it genuine? Where are your deeds of mercy? How are you loving and serving the poor, the marginalized, the mentally ill? Now you might object by saying: The poor in Austin all seem to have nice cars; they just need to manage better. James and Jesus say: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Do you have a nice car? What do they have that you do not? Nutritious meals, better housing, lower crime, mentors? Objections might continue: The poor have gotten themselves in that predicament; they should get themselves out. But didn't you get yourself in your sinful predicament, and Jesus in an act of great mercy, pull you out? I don't have enough resources. But isn't that what the gospel is all about—giving sacrificially, from Jesus' generosity. True mercy gives when it hurts, when it disturbs the bank balance. The gospel compels us to show mercy to the poor and marginalized. It is a test of faith.

Royal Law of Love

In verses 8-13, James puts the whole matter of favoritism under this banner of the *royal law of love*. Showing mercy is both a matter of law and a matter of love. It is a matter of **law** in that **God requires mercy and compassion from the people he rescued by mercy and compassion**. God pulls out the holy pitchfork to prod us along to live as whole, generous, compassionate people. Show mercy and you do well. Refuse to show mercy and you sin. You fall under just judgment: "[For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.](#)" Jesus says that at the end of time we will be judged by how we treated the least (Matt 25). This is Jesus the Lord of Glory. We are to *show* mercy in deeds. [ways] Get creative. Make an impact. Show the mercy of God to the marginalized of our city. Mercy is also a matter of **love**. Christians, the honorable name we have received after Christ, is the very a basis for loving others. Why? We're supposed to be little Christs, depictions of Jesus to the city. What does Christ do? He rescues us from God's deserving judgment. Mercy. When he does this, he presents acceptable to God. But this acceptance doesn't create people who idle in spiritual neutral. If you're gospel-centered, you should be quite the opposite. Moo: "**God's gracious acceptance of us does not end our obligation to obey him; it sets it on new footing.**" The footing of the cross and the resurrection, of Jesus Christ the Lord of glory, compels us to show mercy. How? The gospel frees us from final judgment when judgment falls on Christ. That's mercy. God's riches in Christ for the spiritually poor. You me. When that sinks in, we find a new obligation to God, not based on earning but fueled with merciful effort. We want to max out the grace of God in our lives.



We want to give away the mercy we have received, even if it hurts, pray it into others lives, fill our mouths and actions with it. God motivates us with the carrot of his abounding love and the pitchfork of his holy law. If we'll engage, if we'll have true faith, our mercy will triumph over God's judgment. How? Not that we work our way in, but because his grace is working its way out. *Faith in Jesus Christ the Lord of glory leads to less favoritism and more loving engagement with the poor.*