

James: The Practical Christian

Correcting Your Spiritual Myopia

James 2:1-13

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Correcting Your Spiritual Myopia

Scripture

The animated movie *Shrek* celebrates the worth of society's undervalued people. It revolves around a boorish ogre named Shrek who finds a friend in a talking donkey—creatively named “Donkey”! Shrek unexpectedly falls in love with a princess, whom he and Donkey rescue from a distant castle.

This fairytale spoof emphasizes how people place too much importance on outward appearances.

After freeing the princess, Shrek and Donkey escort her back to the village in keeping with the prince's orders. Because the journey is long, they decide to camp out. Around the campfire, Donkey talks to Shrek about what life will be like once they return to Shrek's home in a humble swamp.

Looking up at the sky, Donkey asks, “Hey Shrek, what are we going to do when we get back to our swamp, anyway?”

“*Our* swamp?” Shrek challenges. “There's no *our*. There's just me and my swamp, and the first thing I'm going to do is build a ten-foot wall around my land.”

Donkey is surprised. He thought they had developed a friendship that would result in sharing their lives and possessions once the quest was over.

“You cut me deep, Shrek!” Donkey confesses. “You cut me real deep just now. You know what I think? This whole wall thing is just a way to keep somebody out.”

The two argue and exchange verbal jabs. At last Donkey asks, “Who are you trying to keep out? Just tell me that, okay?”

“Everyone! Okay?” Shrek exclaims.

“Hey, what's your problem, Shrek? What you got against the whole world, anyway?”

The huge ogre seems almost childlike as he candidly explains, “I'm not the one with the problem. It's the whole world that

seems to have a problem with me. People take one look at me and go, ‘Ahhh! Help! Run! It’s a big, stupid, ugly ogre!’ They judge me before they even know me. That’s why I’m better off alone.”

Donkey says to Shrek, “You know what? When we first met, I didn’t think you were just a big, stupid, ugly ogre.”

“Yeah, I know,” Shrek acknowledges with gratitude. For the first time he realizes someone has looked beyond his outward appearance and accepted him.

That is what James is addressing in today’s text. So, with that in mind, let’s read James 2:1-13:

¹ My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. 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. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶ But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! (James 2:1-13)

Introduction

The late Max Cadenhead, when he was pastor of First Baptist Church in Naples, Florida, riveted his congregation one day with a bold confession.

“My message today is on the parable of the Good Samaritan,” Max announced. “Let me start with an illustration.

“Remember last year when the Browns came forward to join the church?” he asked.

Everyone nodded; the Browns were a very influential family.

“Well, the same day a young man came forward and gave his life to Christ. I could tell he needed help—and we counseled him.” No one nodded; no one remembered.

“We worked with the Browns, got them onto committees. They’ve been wonderful folks,” Cadenhead said to muffled amens. “The young man—well, we lost track.

“Until yesterday, that is, as I was preparing today’s message on the Good Samaritan. I picked up the paper, and there was that young man’s picture. He had shot and killed an elderly woman.”

Chins dropped throughout the congregation, as the pastor continued. “I never followed up on that young man, so I’m the priest who saw the man in trouble and crossed to the other side of the road. I am a hypocrite.”

More of that kind of sober honesty in the church would be very healthy. For God’s kingdom is just the opposite of ours. We go after the rich or the influential, thinking if we can just bag this one or that one, we’ll have a real catch for the kingdom. Like the folks profiled by the apostle James, we offer our head tables to the wealthy and well-dressed and reserve the back seats for those we consider unimportant.¹

It is so easy for us to draw wrong conclusions about people! First-hand initial impressions are seldom right. That’s why prejudice is always wrong.

¹ Chuck Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *The Body: Being Light in Darkness* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1992), 304.

The truth is we all have a problem with prejudice to one degree or another. We all have a case of *spiritual myopia*, or nearsightedness, that causes us to have an improper focus on the mere externals of those we meet. Like it or not, we are all guilty of making hasty judgments about people based on things like their skin color, their ethnic background, their education, their economic or social status. And such judgments wind up not only hurting them but hurting us as well.

Lesson

And so in order to help us correct our spiritual myopia, James addresses this problem head-on in James 2:1-13. He does this by stating the principle in verse 1, illustrating it in verses 2-4, explaining it in verses 5-11, and then applying it in verses 12-13.

I. The Principle Stated (2:1)

First, the principle stated.

In verse 1 James writes, **“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism.”**

The literal meaning of the word **“favoritism”** is “not to receive by face or not to accept or welcome on face value.”

The word **“favoritism”** is found only in three other places in the New Testament. And in all three places God is the subject. In each passage the point is that *God does not respect faces*. He is not one who concentrates on the externals. God always looks past the externals and into the heart. And if we are to be like him, if we are to be conformed to his image, we must learn to do the same.

Remember, it is the initial encounter that James has in mind here. He is not saying you should not be discreet by determining a person’s character in light of whether or not you will be closely involved with him or her. He is not contradicting Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 15 where he tells us that “bad company corrupts good character” (v. 33). For there is a big difference between showing

biblical discernment and the sin of **favoritism**. James is dealing with the prejudice you might show toward someone at a first encounter. He is saying that true faith in Christ and favoritism are incompatible.

So, the principle is simply this: **don't show favoritism.**

II. The Principle Illustrated (2:2-4)

Second, the principle illustrated.

James writes in verses 2-4: **“Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”**

The scene is that of a worship service about to begin. The people are being seated by the ushers. Suddenly a long black limo with dark glass pulls up in front of the church. The driver quickly gets out, runs around to the side of the car and opens the door. The man that gets out looks like he walked out of *Gentlemen's Quarterly*. He is wearing a custom-tailored suit and Johnston and Murphy hand-sewn shoes. His gold rings and Rolex watch are obvious for all to see. The head usher steps forward and says, “I’ll take this one, men.” The visitor is warmly and graciously greeted. And then personally escorted to the best seat in the house.

A few moments later a poor man comes through the doors. He looks really poor. His clothes are “shabby.” Instead of a tailored suit, he’s got on his old work clothes. And they don’t smell too great either. By the way the man talked you could tell right away he’s not very well educated. He is not very impressive. And so the usher tells that man to go sit in one of the back seats or just sit on the floor. In other words, “Just stay out of the way.”

This has been called “the case of the near-sighted usher,” for he was not able to see beyond the externals. James reproves this

practice in verse 4 by saying, **“Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”**

I have told you the story before that Stuart Briscoe, pastor of Elmbrook Church in Milwaukee, WI, tells of the time when a young man with long straggly hair, no shoes, dirty jeans and a dirty T-shirt walked in to their worship service. He walked up to the front of the sanctuary and simply sat on the floor. A dignified, elderly usher walked very deliberately up to the young man. Every eye in the place focused on the approaching encounter. When the usher reached the man, he simply stooped down and sat on the floor next to the hippie and worshiped with him.

If there is one place where there should be no favoritism, it is in the place of worship. If all you have is a set of overalls, you wear them. If you have no shoes, you come without shoes. If you are Black, you come. If you are Hispanic or Oriental, you come. If you are wealthy, you come. If you have nothing, you come. If you have been married a dozen times, you come. If you have never married, you come. If you have a history of gross sin and failures, you come for worship.

You will not be seated down front. You will not be asked to sit in the back, out of the way. Whether you are a charter member or here for the first time, it is first come, first served.

III. The Principle Explained (2:5-11)

Third, the principle explained.

James goes on in verses 5-11 to give us three reasons why showing favoritism is wrong.

The first reason is theological. Favoritism is not compatible with God’s grace.

James writes in verses 5-6a, **“Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor.”**

God doesn't look into a man's bank account and say, "You're the type I want in my kingdom." Nor does he say, "I see how poor and dirty you are. You could look very spiritual; therefore, you are perfect for my kingdom." The point here is not being rich or poor, but the condition of the heart and soul of the person. God is not a respecter of faces. He looks only at the heart.

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:26-27, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."

When God looked for his people, he looked for those the world wasn't picking out. That's why he chose me. That's why he chose you. God delights in taking common people and giving them very uncommon lives. God loves to pick up a broken life and use it for the marvelous display of his grace. He loves to take those the world says are weak and show through their lives his strength and power. That's the kind of trophy God likes. For it points people to him and to his grace.

James is saying here that the way God has worked with people in history is meant to teach you not to judge people by the superficial standards of the world. For God has **"chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith."**

The second reason is logical. James writes in verses 6b-7, **"Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?"**

In those days the nobility were the very ones who were putting the Christians to death. It was the rich and powerful, not the poor people, who were dragging Christians before the court, running them out into the Coliseum and lighting their bodies, like torches. It was often the rich, the influential and the respectable people in the eyes of society who were the greatest enemies of the Church. You generally don't find the poor man doing this.

The issue here is not an issue of being rich or poor. But the issue of showing favoritism. For some of you the root issue may not be someone's amount of money at all. It may be their color, their nationality, their weight, their accent, their age, their education, their job, their clothes, their car, their marital status, or their neighborhood.

The point is that there are certain kinds of people to whom you will be tempted to show partiality and favoritism. Be very careful here. For too often these people are those whom James says wind up **“slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong.”**

The third reason is biblical. It is inconsistent with Scripture. James writes in verse 8, **“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.”** Here James is saying, “If, in warmly welcoming a person, you are truly fulfilling the Law of God that tells you to love your neighbor, you are doing well. For it is not wrong to greet a wealthy man warmly and lovingly. That is what you should do!”

But, James continues in verse 9, **“But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.”** In other words, “Be sure you give exactly the same warm and loving welcome to everyone in your life as well. For if you don't, you are in serious violation of the Law of God.”

In verses 10 and 11 James addresses those who try to play down the seriousness of this sin of favoritism. Here he is responding to those who say, “Well, I do show love to some—just not to all. So I'm at least not a lawbreaker with a capital L.”

To such reasoning James responds by saying in verses 10-11, **“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.”**

James is saying that you cannot choose one Law of God and ignore another and then see yourself as one who is not a law-

breaker. For the man who doesn't commit adultery but does commit murder is still considered by God to be a guilty lawbreaker, even though he has always been faithful to his wife.

James' main point is that the same God who tells you to love people also tells you to love people without favoritism or prejudice. You are not fulfilling God's royal law of love if you only love a select group of people. Instead, you must strive to be one who follows the example of Christ and show unconditional love to all.

I want you to know that I will go on record to stand against any kind of prejudices like these. For James tells us it is a gross violation of God's royal law of love.

The poet wrote, "Paul's girl is rich and haughty, my girl is poor as clay. Paul's girl is young and pretty. My girl looks like a bale of hay. Paul's girl is smart and clever. My girl is dumb but good. But would I trade my girl for Paul's. . . . You bet your life I would!"

That's what we say. "I'll love them if they cut their hair. If they dress right. If they don't talk with an accent. If they don't get too close to me. If they have a college education. If they vote Republican. If they are white." We have a marvelous set of unspoken rules that people had better abide by, or they won't receive our love and acceptance. And, of course, that is wrong.

IV. The Principle Applied (2:12-13)

Finally, the principle applied.

James writes in verses 12-13: **"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"**

The point James is making is that when you are truly merciful toward others, you then have nothing to fear from the judgment of God. But on the other hand, God's judgment will be without mercy toward those who show no mercy.

This does not mean that your salvation is now suddenly based on your good works of mercy. Not at all! For the Scriptures clearly teach that good works can never save you and that salvation is a free gift that is simply received by faith, by trusting in Christ's death to save you from the penalty you deserve for breaking God's laws.

But what this does mean is that if you are truly a Christian, your faith will be seen in genuine acts of love and mercy toward those whom you would not naturally love.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi was the leader of India's nationalist movement against British rule and is considered the Father of India. He is internationally esteemed for his doctrine of nonviolence to achieve political and social progress. Gandhi said in his autobiography that in his student days he was truly interested in the Bible. He was deeply moved by reading the Gospels, and seriously considered becoming a convert, since Christianity seemed to offer the real solution to the very prejudiced caste system that was dividing the people of India. One Sunday, he went to a nearby church to attend services. He decided to see the minister and ask for instruction in the way of salvation and enlightenment on other Christian doctrines. But when he entered the auditorium, the ushers refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go and worship with his own people. Gandhi left and never came back, thinking to himself, "If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu."

The next time you are tempted to prejudice, I want you to think about that. **"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism."** Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our gracious Father, we ask you to forgive us for the sin of favoritism and prejudice, for not loving others the way you have loved us. Grant to us by your Holy Spirit deep repentance and changed hearts as a result of what we have heard from you today. We thank you for being a God of mercy and grace. For the way you continue to love us in spite of the way we fail to love you and others. Transform us by that grace. Change us into a people who are marked by authentic love for others.

And for those here today who have come to realize their need for a relationship with you. For those who have never received Christ as their Savior, O God, work in their lives right now as I speak. Cause them to trust in Jesus Christ alone for the gift of eternal life.

Lord God, use the Word we have heard today to change all of us into a people whose faith is more authentic and honoring to you. We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

CHARGE:

St. Francis of Assisi was terrified of leprosy. One day, coming directly toward him on the path, looking horribly white in the bright sunshine, was a leper. Almost instinctively, he shrank back, shuddering over the thought of contamination from that terrible disease. But then, as he began to consider the Person of Christ and how he treated the outcast, he was able to calm himself and became ashamed of his attitude. So he ran to the leper, threw his arms around him, kissed him and passed on. A moment later he looked back, and there was no one there, only the empty road in the hot sunlight. For the rest of his life, St. Francis was convinced that it was no leper he had met, but the glorious Lord Jesus himself, who was curing St. Francis of his prejudice. As you follow in his steps, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.