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The Letter of James
“Show No Partiality”
James 2:1-13

Rev. John DuBose
 Easley Presbyterian Church
 Easley, South Carolina

When we were in high school, my brother had this t-shirt that I’ll always remember. On the front was a very nice Christian message. It said, “Jesus loves you.” But on the back, it said, “But I’m his favorite.” So, as you can imagine, I hated that shirt! Not for any theological reasons, of course, but because surely, if God has a favorite, then it ought to be me!

Only later in life would I come across a different message in the book of Acts, when Peter says that “God shows no partiality.”¹ God, apparently doesn’t play favorites with us, and so we shouldn’t play favorites either. Not in our families, or in our schools, or in our workplaces, or in our neighborhoods, or while we’re walking down the street, and especially not at church. We should treat one another equally because that’s what God does.

Fred Craddock, the great teacher of preachers, tells the story in one of his sermons of God’s impartiality. He says,

I had occasion some years ago to observe within the frame of one week two sixteen-year-old girls who seemed to be worlds apart. One was in a beautiful blue dress coming down a spiral staircase to a waiting and applauding and admiring group of family and friends. Sixteen years old, pretty as a speckled pup. Everybody was delighted.

Within the same week I saw another sixteen-year-old girl. Standing on the porch of a mountain cabin in eastern Kentucky. She had [a baby] on her hip. The father of the child long gone and she’s standing there alone, about a half-dozen scrawny chickens pecking in the yard, nothing in the cabin, nothing for her, one diapered child. She looks out upon a gray world without any hope.

What’s the difference in those two sixteen-year-old girls? In my prayers that evening, I said to God, ‘Did you notice the difference? Why is it in this world, down the spiral staircase, standing with a baby, sixteen years old? Now, why the difference?’ And when I paused in prayer, God said, “I didn’t notice any difference.” God’s getting a little old, have you noticed that? Losing eyesight and a little senile. Anybody can see the difference except God.

He’s being funny, but he’s making a point. We are all equal before God. But we don’t extend that same grace to one another, do we? We make quick judgments about people all the time. We size up everyone we meet. We try to establish ourselves in the pecking order. “What do you do for a living?” “How long have you been with the company?” “Where did you go to

¹ Acts 10:34

school?” “Who are your parents?” “Where are you from?” “Who did you vote for?” The examples are endless, and we can’t help but do it. We can’t help but position ourselves in a pecking order of who matters more and who matters less. Who is worthy of my time and whom can I ignore?

You’ll remember how last week, James gave us some advice about how to treat other people in our personal interactions. Be slow to speak, quick to listen, and slow to anger. Display your faith in your care for the lowly. This week, he continues down that path when he instructs us to “show no partiality.” Again, he has in view the poor and the lowly when he gives us a wonderful example.

He says, “imagine you’re the head usher at church on Sunday and it’s looking like it’s going to be a normal Sunday until, out of the corner of your eye, you see George Clooney walking up the sidewalk toward the church. And he’s wearing a really nice suit, tailored perfectly. And when he walks through the door, he looks right at you and flashes a charming smile. And he shakes your hand and he thanks you for the bulletin. But at about the same time, coming up right behind George is a man who clearly hasn’t showered in a few days. And his hair is messed up, and his clothes are dirty, and he doesn’t smell too good. And being the head usher that week, you’ve got a decision to make. You know what you should do. You should treat them both the same. But you don’t do that. Instead, you slam the door in the smelly man’s face so that the odor doesn’t upset Mr. George Clooney. Then, you escort Mr. Clooney to the best seat in the house.

Now, in the imaginary scenario that James presents us, we’ve already transgressed. We’ve shown partiality. But is that really how we would behave? If we’re honest, the pattern he describes is apparent enough in our own lives for us to know that he’s not wrong. Showing partiality just comes naturally, I guess. There’s two kinds of people in the world: Those above me and those beneath me. And the closer I get to the ones above me, the better off I’ll be. I’ll be happier and more fulfilled. If I’m kind to the people above me, then maybe they’ll let me be in their club. Maybe they’ll accept me. Maybe I’ll finally be good enough and I’ll feel better about myself. Because we all just want to be good enough. We all want to be well regarded. We all want to belong.

If you attended Ken’s Sunday School over the summer, then you heard him bring up the topic of honor and shame in ancient society. We think about honor and shame today to some extent, but not nearly to the degree that people in the ancient world thought about it. We’re far more individualistic today than most cultures in the time of James. And honor is much more of a community value than an individual value. One cultural anthropologist defines honor as “the value of a person in his or her own eyes, plus the value of that person in the social group.”²

In the Roman dominated world of the day, you could buy honor by being a patron or a benefactor to a labor association or a club. And you might be surprised to hear that even the church in those early days became just another place where a wealthy patron could gain more honor by being the richest person in the room – the biggest fish in a small pond.

These were the kinds of folks who made Paul furious. These were the wealthy folks who showed up to the church early and ate all the food before the laboring class could get there. He

² NIV Application Commentary - James

says, “when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?³

But, surely it can't be all that bad, right? I mean, everybody does it. And that's true. Everybody does it, both today and in the ancient world. We all size ourselves up in relation to other people. We all try to establish a pecking order in our daily interactions. Why is it such a big deal?

James says, “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” Showing partiality, he says, is not a small thing. In fact, he goes on later to say that, in the sight of the law, showing partiality is just as much a transgression as murder. Now James, that's a little dramatic, don't you think. Surely it's not that bad. But in a legal sense, James is exactly right. Because God in Christ has put an end to our divisions. They are done with! And the church's job is to present Christ to the world by treating one another as Christ treats us – without division or partiality. So, when we fail to do that, then yes, it's a scandal to the Gospel. It presents the new life as a lie when we transgress the law.

So, that's the legal reason why we should show no partiality. Now buckle up, because the rest of the sermon is going to get theological. Because as Good Presbyterians, we know what happens when human beings are presented with the law. We inevitably fail. We inevitably fall short. Thanks be to God, then, that there's another word to be spoken. An enabling word which comes by grace. This word of grace that James gives us is that we are now free to see our fellow human beings impartially - as brothers and sisters instead of enemies - because of God's own grace toward us: “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?

Now, why is it grace that God has chosen the poor in the world? Because in the scope of daily life, each of us is poor and lowly. Each of us is infinitely lacking. Especially when compared to glory of the one whose image we bear. God is the only glorious one. If you want to talk about hierarchies, then God is always going to be at the top of the heap. King David, a glorious man by human standards, ascribes instead all glory to God in his final act as king. He prays,

“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. ¹² Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might”⁴

If you want to talk about who has the most honor, then God wins every time. James himself calls God the Lord of Glory. God is the most powerful and the most glorious. And God

³ 1 Corinthians 11:18-22

⁴ 1 Chronicles 29:11-12

deserves all our praise because God is God and we are not. God is greater than all our little kingdoms. There is an infinite distance between the glory of human beings and the glory of God. And yet, says James, “has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?” And we know this because God himself became lowly for our sake. The apostle Paul says,

Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁵

You cannot go any lower than God in Christ has already gone for you. He descended to the depths of human pain and humiliation all because he knew that’s where you and I would be. St. Athanasius says, “Some may ask, why did God not manifest himself by means of other and nobler parts of creation such as sun or moon or stars or fire or air, instead of mere man? The answer is this: The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering people.”⁶

He has come to heal. Heal our souls. Heal our brokenness. Heal our divisions. Paul says,

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.⁷

Meaning, there are now no divisions between us because Christ has overcome them in his own body.

But how? He’s done it by clothing us in his own righteousness. By taking on our sin and giving us his goodness so that when we stand before God, we stand not as enemies, but as beloved children, heirs according to the promise fulfilled in Christ. Paul says,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come... ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Friends, Jesus loves us. We don’t need to prove our worth by treating others differently. Our worth rests already in Christ.

Jesus loves us. We don’t have to worry about who’s better and who’s worse, for we are all now one in Christ.

Jesus loves us. Which means we are free now to love one another.

Jesus loves us, and we are all his favorite. Thanks be to God.

⁵ Philippians 2:5-8

⁶ Quoted in *Fully Beloved* by Timothy Jones

⁷ Ephesians 2:14