

When I hear James tell brothers and sisters in Christ in today’s Scripture that, “*believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism,*” (v. 1) I’m tempted to reply, “That’s a lot easier said than done, James.” Favoritism has both common sense and dangerous elements. And it’s also terribly difficult to eradicate. Someone who has been driving as long as I have might tend to say that favoritism is just a fact of life. Almost all children, for example, think their parents play favorites. Experts devote entire books to favoritism in education or in the workplace, including how to recognize it and how to remove it.

Therefore, James’ proclamation might provide an opportunity from the Holy Spirit to contemplate favoritism by asking us to recall feelings of being treated as second or third best in our family, or in school or in our places of work. Think for a moment about any personal experiences of favoritism that may have come your way.

Of course, in this passage James is addressing the favoritism acted out by people who are materially rich against people who are materially poor. He invites us to imagine how on a day on which the worship service is just getting started, two people walked into a place of worship. One of them clearly had much money that he had spent on his clothing and a haircut. The other person was obviously poor, with very little money to spend on his clothing, haircut, or for that matter, personal hygiene products.

Since there were no megachurches that James’ first century readers belonged to, everyone could easily see the head usher make a big deal of the man who was rich. He eagerly greeted him, gave him a bulletin, and showed him to his seat, and may have stayed until the man was comfortably seated. Perhaps the usher even nudged a few people out of the way to make a place for the rich man in a prominent section.

Yet, the same usher indicated there was no place to sit in the entire church for the man who was poor. He might have told him there weren’t any bulletins left, that is, if we were to imagine they printed bulletins in the first century. The usher certainly told the worshiper who was materially poor that all the seats were so full so that he would have to sit on the floor!

God’s children at Ken Mawr can almost picture the kind of church about which James is writing: The people with white collar jobs, advanced educational degrees and plenty of money are spread out across the front of the church where everyone can see

them. However, their employees, day laborers and students are packed in like sardines way back in the corners of the church.

James clearly noticed what was going on, so he may have taken out his pen and scratched out a letter of protest to the church's members, including its leaders. "*My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,*" he grieved, "*must not show favoritism.*"

Many of the churches that I'm familiar with try to make a difference in the lives of those who are needy. Our church, for example, runs a food pantry; we have taught literacy to students and adults who never acquired reading skills, and pre-pandemic, we conducted services in a nearby nursing home. Yet not many people who are impoverished will walk through our doors to join our largely white, middle- to upper-middle class congregation for worship. So, we don't get much practice at welcoming into our building for a worship service people who are really poor.

That's one reason why I wonder what would happen if what occurred in a nearby church took place in our church. A man walked into the sanctuary of one of our city's largest and loveliest churches and down its center aisle to a seat in the choir loft behind the pulpit as the pastor preached. The church immediately recognized that this fellow had various personal struggles, but it seemed to paralyze all of them in the sanctuary that day—except my friend who I'll call Joe. He quietly walked to where the man had taken his seat and sat down next to him. While many of Joe's friends were perhaps hoping he would talk their visitor into taking a less visible back seat, Joe simply took a place right next to him for the rest of the service.

If someone were to walk down our church's center aisle during worship, wouldn't we naturally prefer they be mentally and economically healthy, especially since the Tree of Life shooting a few years ago? Jesus' followers and friends naturally prefer to surround ourselves with the kinds of people who look, sound, give and perhaps even smell like us. In fact, studies suggest North American churches are becoming not just more racially and politically homogeneous, but also more socio-economically homogeneous.

It isn't, however, just socio-economic status that naturally engenders favoritism. It is abundantly clear that our society exhibits not just favoritism but *judgmentalism* over many issues and concerns. And there are plenty of churches that have conformed with society by moving from favoritism to *judgmentalism* when it comes to public health concerns. We don't need more judgmentalism, dear friends, we need more compassion for others.

This is precisely why after telling the little story of two men who enter the place of worship, James says, *“Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”* (v. 4). When God calls us not to discriminate against those who are different from us, or who disagree with us, our natural ways of treating people are disrupted. When God calls us to welcome them as warmly as God has welcomed us, God gives us the privilege of imitating him. The solution to the problem of favoritism is found in verse 8: *“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.”*

The non-judgmental behavior that God asked James to extend to people who in one way or another differ from us, goes deeper than just welcoming all people to our church. James urges us to, *“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”* (vv. 12-13). **SPEAK! ACT! BE MERCIFUL!** You see, some of James’ readers apparently believed that faith is more a matter of what we believe than of what we do.

When I was in seminary, I knew a friend of a friend who worked with teenagers who were involved in gangs in a high crime area of New York City. Through that ministry dozens of young people came to a personal faith in Jesus Christ and were set free from the cycle of crime and violence. As this community of faith began to grow those new Christians began to reach out in love to their former gang members. Whenever one of these tough gang members would profess to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord, the more mature Christians would be concerned that they were really sincere about their commitment. They would share this message with the new converts: *“Don’t tell us that you are a Christian. We will tell you.”* In other words, don’t merely say you are a Christian, prove it by the way in which you live.

Mary Glover helped distribute food in a neighborhood where Christian writer and advocate for the poor, Jim Wallis, lived and operated a food pantry. She was so materially poor that she also needed a bag of groceries each week. Yet Mary was a kind of leader for the food ministry; she often said the prayer before it opened its doors on Saturday mornings. She was the ministry’s best pray-er. She was one of those people, writes Jim Wallis, *“who pray like they know to whom they’re talking.”*

Mary would often begin by praying something like, *“Thank you, Lord, for waking us up this morning! Thank you, Lord, that our walls were not our grave and that our bed was not our cooling board. Thank you, Lord!”* However, Mary also prayed in a way that showed

that God had shown her what was at stake in every Christians' treatment of people who are materially poor. She always prayed: "Lord, we know that you'll be comin' through this line today, so, Lord, help us to treat you well." God simply won't let James' readers walk past people who are different from them, giving them spiritual sounding words.

God reminds James' readers that true religion is not just a matter of what we believe or even the rituals we practice. It's certainly not just a matter of nice words that we sometimes say to needy people. God insists that true religion is also about how God's children treat others, especially those whom society so easily marginalizes.

Did you notice that in the 13th verse of chapter 2 God goes so far as to say through James that "*Mercy triumphs over judgment?*" Religious practice on Sunday without merciful and faithful living the other six days of the week is basically worthless. Instead of receiving God's mercy that brings eternal life, it only perpetuates spiritual death. Thankfully, the faith that God graciously gives to his beloved children is a living faith. It doesn't just say and know all the right things about God, God's world, and God's creatures. James insists that the faith God graciously gives us is a faith that, among other things, actively cares for the poor, as well as care for people with whom we disagree.

Remember how this sort of talk made Martin Luther nervous? Once the great Reformer rediscovered the sheer grace of justification by faith, he didn't appreciate James' repeated calls to do good deeds. Perhaps Martin Luther had other reasons for criticizing James. After all, he could be quite critical of peasants and other people who were poor. James makes it perfectly clear that our actions are inseparable from our faith.

Let me repeat what he wrote in verse 8: "*If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right.*" James is not declaring a War on Poverty! He is plainly stating that how the church treats people in need should differ from the way our society often treats people.

How do we Christians view the poor? Do we expect the government to take care of the poor, so we won't have to? Or do we look at them the way Jesus views them? Cultural standards of prestige and conformity will tempt us to give them a seat on the floor. But the ultimate and unavoidable question for us to ask is this: *Who's the Judge?* Amen.