

Royal Law: Love without Favoritism

James 2:1-13 (NIV)

¹ My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old 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 and sisters: 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 dishonored 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 blaspheming 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, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall 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 is very practical book. Written by the half-brother of Jesus, he addresses the 12 tribes of Israel scattered among the nations to urge them not to use their newfound freedom from the law, freedom that comes by the forgiveness of sins bought and paid for by Jesus, as a license to sin. He tells them to not merely listen to the Word of God but also to do what it says. Your faith produces actions, governs how you treat people.

With that theme in mind, James has us ask the question of what will we do as he paints a hypothetical but real situation. A rich man and a poor man walk into worship. Do you favor the rich guy by showing him a nice seat, a seat of honor, while pushing the poor guy to the corner or to sit at your feet? Do you treat the rich guy better because you think that he will elevate you, make your life better, open doors of opportunity to you? When we give someone more attention because of what we think they can do for us, this is favoritism. It's honestly selfishness, and therefore sin. If this is how we deal with people, James bluntly says: "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism." (verse 1)

Have we slid into favoritism here at Light of the Valley? If an obviously rich person walked in and right behind him or her was a poor person with dirty, tattered clothes, what would you do? Who would you talk to first? From what I can observe, I believe that people here would go and talk to both because I've seen that kindness and hospitality from you time and time again. So, I guess it's down to how you as an individual would decide who you would talk to first. Or would you actually avoid them both because you're a shy introvert and instead you would retreat to the safety of your seat in the sanctuary or to the people that you already know?

Favoritism is not the fact that you are going to get along with some people here at Light of the Valley better than others. Favoritism is when we pursue relationships and conversations for the main purpose of benefiting ourselves. Do we show partiality with the people here we already know because it's easier for us since we already know them, have built up that relationship, rather than putting in the effort and energy of starting a conversation not knowing what to expect, not knowing how it will go, not knowing if you will get along or if you will inadvertently offend them? Are we favoring someone because it makes our lives easier?

Or maybe we are upset because we perceive favoritism among other people, favoritism not directed to us. I mean, we want people to make us feel welcomed, to take in interest in us, make us feel like a priority. I know that when I'm traveling and visiting churches, I am looking for someone to extend a greeting to me, and I feel ignored and neglected when no one does. When we don't feel wanted or worth noticing, it's easier to point the finger at the others accusing them of playing favorites when they don't favor me. But then we're right back to selfishness which is at the core of the sin of favoritism. If this is our mentality, we need to ask ourselves the question James asked his readers: "have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" (verse 4)

Regardless of whether we're favoring people at church over others for selfish reasons or we're upset that others are not favoring us the way we want to be, we have broken what James calls the "royal law found in Scripture." (verse 8) We are not loving our neighbors as ourselves. Is that so really bad of a sin? James tells us: Yes! "If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (verses 9-10) By our selfish desires and actions to favor others for our own gain or our desire to be favored so that we can feel important and wanted, we have sinned. We have broken God's royal law. We are lawbreakers deserving punishment.

This is why we need the God we have. Imagine if God operated by playing favorites, that he selected people to belong to him, to be saved, because of what they would do for him. If we put it into business terms, what if God only selected people with good ROI – return on investment, that he would only save people who would be the best recruits for him to get more followers or who would give him the biggest offerings or who would love him and give him the most affection?

Some people have no problem saying that God does play favorites. He picked Abraham to bless; the Israelites as his people chosen to carry his Word into the world and from whom the Messiah would come; Mary to be the mother of Jesus; the 12 apostles to do miracles, etc. Yet what was the self-serving aspect of this so-called favoritism? Abraham was rich, but God didn't ask for his riches. Abraham couldn't have kids with his wife Sarah, and yet God miraculously made that happen to benefit them and everyone in the world. The Israelites were God's chosen people, but time and time again they turned their backs on God and followed other gods; they were consistently unfaithful to him. He didn't pick them for their devotion to him. Mary was a lowly virgin betrothed to a poor carpenter. What was God going to get out of that relationship? The 12 were chosen to go out and tell others about Jesus, but were probably the worst candidates to get people to buy into a religion because many of them were blue collar workers, one was a controversial political activist, another was a hated government employee. What would God really get out of them being his 12 apostles? Did God choose these people because they would bring him a big return on his investment in them?

Not at all! God was the one who lifted all these people up. He blessed them by giving entirely of himself to them. He did all the work. When sin entered the world, he's the one who came up with and implemented the plan to crush the devil and free all people from the eternal consequences of their selfishly chosen sin, that they favored self-gain over love of God. God preserved the promised family line through Abraham, through the Israelites, so that Jesus would be born from a virgin at exactly the right time in exactly the right way, the way that he said it would happen – all to benefit us. Jesus spent his entire life from his time in Mary's womb to the time he gave up his spirit on the cross in service to you, keeping the royal law found in Scripture at all times. God the Holy Spirit gave you faith to believe in Jesus as our perfect substitute through the recorded word of those 12 average, controversial men. By doing so, he has forgiven all our sin, all our selfishness. He has clothed us instead with Jesus' rich perfection, given us a luxurious, eternal dwelling place in heaven with him. God has made us rich in faith, sparing no expense, not based on anything that we do for him.

What's more is that God demands nothing in return. He has no quotas of sharing our faith with others for us to meet in order to receive all these good things. He has no obligatory praise time that we have to fulfill or a monetary amount we have to give for him to do these things. God gave all this for us even if we would reject these riches and push them aside. God showed no favoritism when it came to us or to anyone else. "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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?" (verse 5)

Yes, we are each blessed by God in different ways. But every time God does something, he works it for our good. And he has blessed everyone in this whole world regardless of where we come from, what our past is, what we have to offer God, with the same richness of Christ, of a perfect life lived in place of yours, a life sacrificed to pay the price of yours and my lawbreaking, of all our favoritism. He did not just judge us as a bad return on investment. He treated us not as we deserved to be treated. This is the opposite of favoritism. This is mercy. As we learned from how God loved us: "Mercy triumphs over judgment." (verse 13b)

Because we have been shown God's rich mercy and because of what Christ has done for us by keeping the royal law at all times, we have been freed from an obligatory keeping of God's law. We now get to serve others, to keep the royal law found in Scripture of loving others. So James urges us: "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." (verses 12-13)

Church is an excellent place to put the law of freedom into action as we strive to keep the royal law of loving our neighbor as ourselves. You did not choose the people who come here to church. We don't share all the same pastimes or hobbies or political opinions. We don't all share the same salary base or background or color of skin. We don't all live in Layton. Yet God chose each of us to be richly blessed by him with what he has done for us to forgive our sins and remember them no more. He chose us without partiality, without any thought as to how we could benefit him. Now we get to reflect this impartial love to others.

Having been loved by God without partiality, without favoritism, who will you now show this love to right here in this assembly today? It's not going to be easy with everyone. So we remember that God didn't love us and live for us and die for us because it was easy or rewarding for him. He did it for our benefit. We love others for their benefit, to see a love without favoritism, just as God has done for us. Amen.