James Lesson 3 (2022)

**VICTORY OVER FAVORITISM**

James 2:1-13

Key Verse: 2:12-13

“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.”

 There is an impression that we, as evangelical Christians, tend to be concerned more with spreading the gospel than with growing deeper and mature in the image of God. I hope that is not the case with us. Gospel cannot go far enough unless it grows deep. The author James, who was the pastor of the Jerusalem Church, did not lose sight of the importance of the spiritual maturity of believers in Christ. In the first chapter, James challenged the Jewish believers to consider the trials of many kinds not as opportunities for complaining but as opportunities for great joy and spiritual growth (1:1-18). To bear the fruit of righteousness in us, such as love, peace, joy, and many heavenly treasures, we should obey God’s words (19-27).

In the remaining chapters of the book of James (Chapters 2-5), James continues the theme of Christian maturity, dealing with irritating problems within the church community. Today’s passage is about favoritism. Favoritism goes on in numerous ways, based on race, gender, nationality, financial status, culture, language, etc. It exists everywhere, workplaces, classrooms, families, and even churches. When we feel discriminated against for whatever reason, we are discouraged and can become bitter. Favoritism is unhealthy views and practices which create distrust, jealousy, and anger. It’s a highly complex problem, which is not easy to resolve. Let’s see how we can overcome favoritism.

Look at verse 1. “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.” According to James, favoritism should not exist among believers. Christians should not show favoritism. Unfortunately, however, it has been a problem even in churches right from its beginning. James knew the seriousness of the situation. Yet, he didn’t minimize or hide it by putting it under the rug. Instead, he exposed it upfront and challenged the believers to deal with it by giving them practical instructions. Apparently, his challenge had offended some members.

James calls Christians “believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” By calling them “believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,” James reminded them that they belong to the glorious Lord Jesus Christ. It means that all believers in Christ Jesus became God’s children and the citizens of the kingdom of God not because of what they have done but because of God’s grace. So there shouldn’t be any discrimination or bias among God’s beloved children.

As our children grow up, sometimes they ask, *“Dad! Who is your favorite, me or my sister?”* How do we respond? *“My dear, we love both of you equally and very much!”* Some kids don’t believe it. But if we, as parents, favor one child over another for whatever reason, it can cause relationship problems in the family. The case of Jacob’s family in the book of Genesis (Gen. 37:3, 4, 18) is a classic example of favoritism. Jacob’s favoritism over Joseph caused distrust and jealousy among the siblings and had severe consequences.

However, showing favor to someone when it is due is not favoritism. For example, if two people came to our church at the same time, an older woman with crutches and a healthy young man, what should we do? We should help the older lady find a convenient place to sit with crutches and let the young guy find his place. Is this favoritism? No. Then what is it? It is kind consideration.

Favoritism is the practice of giving unfair treatment to one person or group at the expense of another. Favoritism is unjust treatment. It should not happen. Everyone should be accepted and treated equally in the church. That’s not what happened in James’ church. Look at verses 2-4. “Supposed a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes and say, ‘Here is 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?” James's example in these verses can be an actual story or fiction.

By the way, why do we make such a distinction between people? What’s the hidden motive? It’s evident in James’ example: self-interest. The rich man who wore a gold ring and fine clothes represents the rich and the powerful. In ancient times a gold ring was a symbol of authority. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a rich and influential person join our church? Think about all the benefits they could bring to our church. After all, when people come to church, they are more interested in becoming acquainted with these famous people than in worshipping the Lord.

But what about the poor person? Well, following the selfish interest, there is nothing to be gained from showing any favor because he has no influence or authority at all. So they can be ignored. Indeed, favoritism based on self-interest is evil. A church should never be a place of business. It should be a place where everyone, regardless of their race, gender, skin color, financial status, age, should be welcomed, appreciated, and treated equally as loving brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.

Unfortunately, we are also guilty of showing favoritism, not necessarily purposefully. Often bias and discrimination are subtle through non-verbal communications or eye expressions. We may prefer certain ethnic groups to others due to our cultural background and upbringing. It seems that as long as different people gather together, favoritism is bound to happen.

But then, how can we overcome our bias and discriminatory tendencies? In verses 5-13, James gives practical instructions.

***First, we should change how we look at others (5-7).*** The world looks at our outward appearances and achievements, such as skin color, ethnicity, how we dress, the kind of car we drive, wealth, social status, educational background, and possessions. But In God’s sight, all these are worth nothing. God does not look at our appearance or worldly accomplishments. He looks at our hearts. However, the problem is that Christians still tend to look at others as the world does. We either underestimate or overestimate people based on our worldly standards and show favoritism. It may not be intentional but almost automatic. That’s why it’s more severe than we think it is. It’s a kind of cognitive distortion. Therefore, we should change how we look at others, different from the world.

In verses 5-7, James confronts his audience sternly. Look at verses 5-7. “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? 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? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?” Let’s think about what James said in his statements. He said in verse 5, “**Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world….”**

What does it mean? It does not mean that God favors only the poor people, not the rich. No. It means that, unlike the world, God includes the poor people in his choice because he does not value people based on their material wealth. Likewise, as God’s people, we should not value people according to their material wealth.

In verse 6, James rebukes those who discriminate against the poor people by saying, “You have dishonored the poor.” They acted against the fundamental gospel truth and dishonored God by discriminating against the poor. In verse 7, James seems to oppose the rich people. But his real intent is that the wealthy Jewish believers should not be treated better or superior in the church than the poor. The truth is that everyone is just as sinful regardless of wealth, social status, race, age, gender, skin color, education. The bottom line is that we should change how we see others in the same way God sees us and through the lens of God’s grace. It’s easier said than done. But imagine what kind of church we can make through overcoming our bias and shallow understanding of others and seeing them through the lenses of God’s grace. A healthy and loving community. If we don’t struggle to change, what kind of church are we making? We are all responsible for it.

***Second, we should love others as we love ourselves (8-11).*** Look at verses 8-11. “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But 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. For he who said ‘You shall not commit adulterer,’ also said, ‘You shall not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.”

Here, James uses the term **“the royal law.”** What is “the royal law” found in Scripture? James quotes from Leviticus 19:18, which states, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

Why is it called **“the royal law”**? A couple of reasons. Firstly, it’s called the royal law because the king gave it. Secondly, it’s the royal law because it supersedes all other laws. Apostle Paul confirms it by saying in Romans 13:9, which states, “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“Love your neighbor as yourself!” That’s the royal law. We see that the royal law assumes that people love themselves. Loving oneself is natural, normal, and healthy. Of course, loving oneself is different from being selfish or self-centered. But people who do not care for their own wellbeing and work hard only for others may be considered “selfless” or “sacrificial.” But in reality, it’s not healthy to neglect one’s needs and limitations. Self-care is a necessary discipline for our healthy living. In other words, we should care for our neighbors and ourselves. Dr. Scott Peck, the author of “The Road Less Traveled,” said, *“Love is the will to extend one's self to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth.”*

To love our neighbor as ourselves is not a matter of personal preference. It’s the royal law that we must obey. We should love our neighbor as ourselves whether we fool like doing it or not. It’s the life-giving life principle we should all abide by. It may not be so hard for us to keep this law when dealing with people we are comfortable with, like close friends or children. But what about people we are not satisfied with or prejudiced against? How about those who make life difficult for us? Can we pick and choose our neighbors? No. Look at verse 10. “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”

I am guilty of breaking the royal law by showing favoritism at some point. Can we say we were not showing any bias when considering all our relationships at home, workplaces, classrooms, and church? Did I receive special favor in a manner that was unfair to others? Oh, my! Overcoming favoritism is far more challenging than we could ever imagine. One more thing. Do you consider yourself a victim of partiality, bias, or discrimination? How did you respond to unfair treatment? Did you get angry and try to get even? I know I did. Most of us are not just victims or victimizers. We are both victims or victimizers of bias and favoritism. How do we overcome them?

Read verse 12. “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.” According to James, we should not be over-reactive. Instead, we should have self-control. In chapter 3, he talks about taming our tongue. But in this verse, James talks about judgment. “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law.” He said that the law that gives us freedom would judge us. Wait a minute! Are we, Christians, going to be judged? The answer is yes. But the judgment for believers is different from the judgment for unbelievers. We will not lose our salvation. Yet, we will lose our reward if we sin by practicing favoritism. He could also mean that we won’t bear the fruit of righteousness in our lives.

Look at verse 13 again. “Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” The phrase “Mercy triumphs over judgment” is a little confusing. The New Living Translation of this verse helps me to understand better. “There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.” Mercy and judgment are the opposite. God possesses these two distinctive characteristics, justice and mercy. The death of Jesus Christ is where God’s justice and mercy met. If God were only just and not merciful enough, we would have no hope of salvation. God’s mercy triumphs over judgment! Now, we, as God’s children, should practice God’s mercy and love and forgive them rather than getting angry at others or holding grudges at them. Jesus said, “Be merciful just your Father is merciful.” (Lk. 6:36)

Let me close the sermon. We learned why we should not practice favoritism. We also learned how to win victory over bias and favoritism: 1) We must change how we look at others through the lens of God’s mercy, and 2) we should love them as ourselves. Love overcomes all barriers of discrimination. Do not be discouraged if you realize that you have been showing favoritism. You can change now. It’s never too late. As C.S. Lewis said, ***“You cannot go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.”***

If any of you are being mistreated, do not remain in bitterness and discouraged. Remember God, the father, who had favor on you so that you may be rich in faith and become heirs of his glorious kingdom now and forever. He wants us to know that even though we may be poor in the eyes of this world, we are far richer than all the wealthiest people on earth. You are God’s treasured possessions, and you belong to Him. So may we not remain in resentment but learn to love them instead by forgiving them over and over. By obeying the royal law, we can be victorious and free indeed.