

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes

Lesson Text: James 2:1-13

Lesson Title: Avoid Showing Favoritism

Introduction

Favoritism is no new thing. It roots itself in sinful humanity and demonstrates itself in both the world and the church. In the early Christian church there is much evidence that there was social, racial, and economic favoritism. The social tension is obvious as you read the book of Acts and First Corinthians. One specific example is that those who were more affluent in society were allowed to eat the Lord's Supper before those who were poor (1 Corinthians 11). Another example is in Acts 6 which records the racial tension that was in the early church. It was not long after Pentecost that the Greek speaking Jews murmured about the treatment they were receiving from the Jerusalem Jews.

While the Jewish Christian readers of James' epistle had truly received the Gospel and trusted Christ as their Savior, their actions in life were still governed largely by their social upbringing and prejudices. The same is true among churches today. How we treat people is based more on our social and racial upbringing than on our spiritual maturity. It also seems that what little progress we have made in avoiding favoritism can be attributed to the laws of man rather than a proper biblical understanding. God's people should lead in this area, not reluctantly follow!

In light of the truth of James 2:1-3, believers must ask and answer the following questions. First, what does God's Word say about showing favoritism? Is it acceptable or is it a sin? Second, are the same examples of favoritism described by James in the early church still happening in our church? Is so, why? Third, what affect does favoritism have on us and the unbeliever? Fourth, is there any hope for victory over favoritism?

The Condemnation of Favoritism (James 2:1-4)

Verse 1

"My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons."

"My brethren" are transitional words indicating a new topic from that discussed in chapter one. The words "my brethren" reminds James' readers of the intimacy and sanctity of the relationship they shared as brothers and sisters in Christ. When we address a subject such as favoritism, we must understand our unique and special relationship to Jesus Christ and to each other. Those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ are God's children. We are a family of faith and should live and treat others accordingly.

The "faith of our Lord Jesus Christ..." is a reference to the Christian faith as a body of belief. "Have not" are words of prohibition. Literally it means "stop." "Respect of persons" is referring to the "face of a person." James is telling his readers to stop receiving people in church according to their face. Simply stated, don't show favoritism based on how someone looks. James is also saying that if you claim to believe the Christian body of belief while holding favoritism in your heart, you are contradicting the very body of belief you claim to hold. Favoritism and faith can't live together in the same house!

In Luke 20:21, Jesus' enemies have come to seek to spy on Him and entrap Him. They admitted that Jesus never "...acceptest the person of any." The word "*person*" in Luke 20:21 is the same word "person" in James 2:1. Even the enemies of Jesus had to confess that Jesus did not accept or reject people according to their face, or how they looked. When you read the gospels, Jesus never dealt with people according to their racial, social, or economical profile. In Acts 10:34, Peter said, "*Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.*" In Ephesians 6:9, when Paul was dealing with the way masters dealt with slaves, he reminded them "...*there is no respect of persons*" with God. For professing believers to show favoritism and "respect of persons" is to go against everything God, Christ, and Christianity is.

Note: All of us know what it is to scan people, look them over, and size them up. Sometimes we do that by the color of their skin, the cost of their clothing, the language they use and the company they keep. More people are profiled in church than any other place. James condemns this and commands his readers to stop it if they are going to claim to be Christians.

Verse 2-4

"For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say

to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?"

Following his word of condemnation, James provides his readers with an illustration of what he is teaching. His illustration is about how people were being seated in church. Two visitors "come unto your assembly." One of these visitors has "a gold ring" and "goodly apparel." The other man is "a poor man" wearing "vile" or trashy "raiment." "Gold rings" were often rented and worn to symbolize wealth and importance. The "goodly apparel" was worn to signify prominence or standing in the community. The man with the "gold ring" and "goodly apparel" is told to "sit here in a good place." He is given a prominent seat in the church where everyone will notice him.

The word "poor" here means "a homeless man, a street person, someone bent over with need." The "poor" man is told to "stand thou there" probably a reference to a place where he is not likely to be noticed. He is told to "sit here under my footstool." A man's "footstool" was a place of humiliation. It represents the lowest place possible. Today, it's the same thing as an usher picking out a spot for someone of a different race who comes into our assembly, or, seating someone not dressed according to our standards on a pew where they can't be seen on our television broadcast. It also occurs when visitors come to Sunday school and they are directed to certain classes so as not to interrupt the social status of other classes. These are actions of favoritism and they do not belong in the household of faith.

James' question is, "Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?" James' question speaks both to the act and to the consequences of their favoritism. "Are ye not then partial in yourselves" refers to their *inward attitude* and their *outward actions*. "Partial" means "to make distinctions." James is saying they are making distinctions within themselves. They were looking at people and passing judgment. Believers still do this today and it is sin.

"And are become judges of evil thoughts" means those who make distinctions because of race, social status, wealth, education and a thousand other reasons, have been motivated by "evil" thoughts. When believers show favoritism we "become judges," empowered by our "evil thoughts." Some would argue that our "evil thoughts" are justifiable and even biblical. Truth is, our "evil thoughts" are rooted in our prejudices and traditions.

The Consequences of Favoritism (James 2:5-11)

The consequences and fruit of favoritism will always be destructive. It will always result in inconsistent conduct and will always violate the law of love. Now that doesn't mean that your church won't be full or that your Sunday school class won't be full. What it does mean is that your church and class may be full of people you have chosen and selected and those whom the Lord wanted there may not be present. That's what James wants his readers and us to think about in this section.

First, the consequences of favoritism always results in inconsistent conduct as James refers to in verses 5-7.

Verse 5

"Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?"

"Hearken" means "listen." "My beloved brethren" is James' attempt to touch their heart with the truth he is about to teach. "Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him" are words of reminder to his readers that God has made the "poor" the objects of His love and favor. The very people that James' readers were rejecting were the very people Jesus Christ was accepting. Some of the very people we would not welcome in our churches because of their skin color or their social status are the very ones Christ came to save.

Question: Is it possible that we would not let certain people join our church and yet Christ will let them into His kingdom?

The history of Christianity proves that the vast number of those who have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior are the very people that we reject. Those who are lacking in certain things in life are often in a better position than those who have everything to discern God's saving purpose and to be drawn unto Him. "Hath not God chosen" means "God spoke out for Himself" those He called to be saved. The word "chosen" is the Greek word *eklegomai* {ek-leg-om-ahee} the same word recorded in Ephesians 1:4, "*According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world...*" a reference to God's election of us to salvation.

"Chosen" is one of the mystery words in the New Testament. The mystery that in man's freedom, whosoever will may come and on the other hand all who do come have been "*chosen in him before the foundation of the world,*" will never fully be understood in this world. God saves sinners because He intends to save them and God has intentionally "chosen the poor" to be "rich in faith."

Why God "chose the poor of this world" to be "rich in faith" and "heirs of the kingdom" is not for us to question. This verse doesn't mean that everyone who is "poor" is going to be saved or that everyone who is "rich" is going to hell. Churches can be just as prejudice toward the rich as they can the poor. James is saying however, that God has deliberately "chosen" to call those classes and groups of people who are often rejected by others to be the "heirs of the kingdom." This is in keeping with the words of the Apostle Paul, *"For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence"* (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

Question: Since God has chosen the "poor," what right do we have to show favoritism toward them or judge them? A person who professes faith in Jesus Christ while at the same time despising the poor and showing favoritism, has a dead and unfruitful faith.

Verse 6-7

"But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?"

"Ye" stands in contrast to "hath not God" in verse 5. While God is choosing the "poor" and welcoming the poor into His kingdom, God's people are "despising" them. "Despised" means "insulted in word, deed, and thought." In the Greek world it meant "to not give weight or take seriously." Is this not a stinging word of judgment to our hearts? Too many times we look at the poor or people not in our class and we simply don't take them or their condition seriously.

Not only was the conduct of some believers out of harmony with God's choice of the poor, it was also inconsistent with the actions of "rich men." Not only had "rich men" oppressed the believers and taken them "before seats of judgment," they had also "blasphemed" the "worthy name" of Jesus Christ. "Rich men" were being honored and given the best seats in church simply because they were rich, an act that was morally reprehensible. The conduct of these believers indicated an attitude that was blind to the reality of the situation. How could James' readers give honor to a class of people that dishonored the Lord? To do so would seem to say that they

were no better than them and in fact "blaspheme" the "worthy name" of Jesus, the name "by which they were called" (*The Epistle of James, Mid-American Theological Journal, Vol. 10. No.1, p.35*). It just didn't make sense for believers who were mistreated by the rich to show the rich favoritism.

Second, the consequences of favoritism will always violate the law of love (vv.8-11).

Verse 8-9

"If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors."

Some people excuse themselves from James' teaching by saying, "Well, that's the way I was raised." James wants his readers and us to know if the way we were raised is contrary to the "royal law" of God's love, the way we were raised was wrong. The "royal law" is "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14). It is the law of love that governs those who are citizens of Christ's kingdom. The "royal law" of love is like the pivot man in basketball. Everything rotates around him. If believers live by this law and truly love our neighbors without showing favoritism, then "ye do well."

"But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors." The Greek word for "transgressors," refers to a man who has a prescribed course to walk, but steps over the line and walks beside the intended path instead of on it. When we show favoritism and convince ourselves that we are not sinning, we step over the line as far as God is concerned. We must hear what James is saying. "Ye commit sin" is clear and to the point. When we show favoritism, it is "sin." The word "sin" means "miss the mark, to wander from the path of righteousness."

Note: You never stop showing favoritism by trying to like or love the people you are rejecting. You stop showing favoritism first of all by confessing it as "sin."

Verse 10 -11

"For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law."

James speaks these words directly and specifically for people like us who might think favoritism is not that serious of a matter. There are some sins that God's people take serious and some sins that are simply dismissed as trivial and insignificant. James says, "Anyone who shows favoritism is a lawbreaker just like an adulterer or murderer." James is not saying that showing favoritism has the same consequence as murder or adultery. What he is saying is that showing favoritism is just as much a breaking of the law of God.

"Whole law" is the entire law of God. If God's law is broken or "offended in one point," the offender is "guilty" of breaking "all" of God's law. The word "offend" is the Greek word *patio*, meaning "to trip." The word was used to suggest a picture of a long road that is paved but has some rough spots over which the traveler stumbles. It doesn't matter how many miles of the road are smooth if there is one spot that is there to cause someone to stumble, it is a problem. It doesn't matter how faithful we are to church, how much money we give to missions, how well we dress, and how fundamental we are in our faith. If we harbor favoritism in our hearts, it is like a "rough spot" in the road and it will eventually trip us up on the journey of faith.

It is amazing how many people think they are going to heaven based on what sins they do not commit while totally ignoring such sins as prejudice and favoritism. The life of faith and genuine Christianity cannot be selective. Believers are not free to pick and choose which laws we obey and which ones we will ignore. To violate any divine law is a sin and that shows lack of reverence for both the law and the Lawgiver.

The Challenge to Avoid Favoritism (James 2:12-13)

Verse 12-13

"So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment."

As James brings to a close his challenging and convicting words regarding favoritism, he stresses the importance of all of us living in light of facing God's judgment. "So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty" means that regarding this matter of favoritism, each of us will face it at the judgment of God.

"For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed not mercy" means that if you were unmerciful to people in ministering to them, giving to them, or even in where you sat them in your church, you will have "judgment without mercy." Puritan Thomas Adams said, "That which a man spits against heaven, shall fall back on his own face." If you are merciful with your fellow man when you stand before God He will be merciful to you. If you are all about law and prejudice before your fellow man, James says it will be all the same with you when you stand before God (Matthew 5:7).

The certainty of God's "judgment" should arouse the believer to a careful consideration of if and how we show favoritism.

Conclusion

James was concerned about the way people were living out their claims to faith in Christ. To claim to be a Christian and a follower of Jesus Christ is the greatest claim a person can have. To then show favoritism and prejudice toward certain people is the greatest contradiction to that claim.

Times may change, but sin doesn't. Sadly, the sin of favoritism is alive and well in the church. And that fact would not be true unless it lived in me and you.

Today's lesson is a great opportunity to apply last week's lesson from James 1:22, "*Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.*" As you think about the sin of favoritism, ask God to show you ways you are prone to treat others based on what they look like, what they wear, where they live, and how they rank according to your standard. Then humbly ask God for forgiveness. Ask the Lord to help you to show mercy to people instead of favoritism. Thank God for the mercy He has shown to you. And ask God to start a revival of mercy in your church by starting it in you.

Amen.