

Faith Works: The Book of James

Poisonous Partiality – Part 1

James 2:1-7

Mark Vroegop

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 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? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? (James 2:1–7)

There are particular concepts that are so foundational to our humanity, that we don't need to teach them to children. For example, you do not need to teach a child to be self-centered. Nor do you need to teach him or her to be possessive. Just think about how quickly a child learns to say, "I do it," or "Mine."

These reactions are part of the natural sinful responses that are endemic to our lives. But these responses are merely the sinful reaction to good things. You want children to be independent—to do it on their own. You want a child to take responsibility. It's the sinful expression that's troubling.

Here's another category: "That's not fair." How many times have parents heard this protest?

A few weeks ago, my wife and I were riding in an elevator with one of our adult sons. We were laughing (kind of) at the level of historic competition between our three boys as to whom received the honor of pushing the buttons in the elevator. We literally had to rotate turns so that the pushing of buttons was "fair." It was not a great parental memory.

Fairness is not just important to kids. It's important to everyone. And for good reason. Pushing buttons on an elevator is one thing, but when you've been treated unfairly or judged prematurely or evaluated unjustly, it's deeply painful. More than that, it's wrong.

Since the world is the playground of the brokenness of sin, we would expect to see a wide variety of issues of "fairness." Our best secular attempts with policies, procedures, laws, courts, governments, etc., are going to struggle to define and implement the right standard of fairness or justice. We'd expect it in the world at some level.

What about the church? You would hope that people who have a theological vision of God's glory, a biblical understanding of sin, a deep love for God's grace, and an other-centered orientation would be "fair." Sadly, that is not always the case.

The Problem of Partiality

When unfairness is practiced in the Church, it's a different kind of issue. It's more egregious because of who we are and because of what's important.

The opening verses of James 2 are some of the most profound and pointed verses as it relates to the unfairness of partiality. Over the next two weeks, we are going to try to explore this issue and how to think about it from a biblical framework.

In God's providence, we are tackling this text on Sanctity of Life Sunday and a day before Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Both issues are historically linked by what it means to be an image-bearer and issues of injustice. And both have partiality in the mix.

Let me also acknowledge that this text lands in a broader context within secular culture, within evangelicalism, and within our church. Several months ago, I mentioned that it's important to think about issues through a three-fold lens: cultural-political-theological. Hopefully, you'll remember that I cautioned us to discern our starting point—the thing that makes us the most afraid or that we get most concerned about—first. Last week, in addressing Christian Nationalism, I was trying to identify a theological issue with cultural and political expressions.

I'm will do my best to major in the theological lane because that's my area of calling, and I think it's the most important. I'm going to make some applications culturally, and I'm going to do my best to stay out of the political, knowing that what is political versus what is cultural is sometimes hard to discern.

Could I ask you to do something for me? I'm asking you to listen for yourself first. Resist the urge to immediately jump toward applications for others or really good questions that need to be asked. I'm not saying you shouldn't ask your questions. But the order is really important. Start with: What does the Bible say? How does it apply to me? And then. . .what are the implications of this?

The book of James is candid and clear. Remember that it's written to a group of people who are experiencing hardship. James not only wants them to embrace a steadfast joy, but he also wants them to remember that faith works. If the gospel is true, then it should impact the way Christians live. The gospel has critical implications—that's the point of Chapters 2-3.

Four Crucial Questions

As we examine this text over the next two Sundays, I want to try to answer four key questions about partiality:

- 1) What is partiality?
- 2) When is it sinful?

- 3) What does partiality look like?
- 4) How do we address it?

Today we'll only cover the first two questions. And even when we've answered all four questions, I know that you'll have more questions. Can I remind you that sometimes, having better questions or even more questions is a sign of growth?

Overview

In order to answer the first question, I want to start with a high-level exegetical summary.

In verse one, James refers to the recipients as "brothers," which is the kind of language he's used before when addressing particularly pointed issues (see 1:2, 1:16, 1:19). He then lays out the principle clearly about partiality and he links it to "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." This is clearly a gospel-implication issue.

Then James gets specific. In verses 2-3, he lays out a scenario connected to a rich man being treated differently than a poor man. Verse 4 calls out the problem: ". . . have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" Remember this verse!

What follows in verse 5-6a is an affirmation of a Christian value-set: "God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." This example of partiality results in dishonoring the poor man.

Then James goes a bit further. In verses 6-7, he addresses the fact that it was the rich who were oppressing them, and that they were the ones who were blaspheming the "honorable name by which they were called." Now, we'll look at this more in a moment. But what James is identifying here is that their previous judgment about the value of a rich man was not only misplaced spiritually, but it was also practically unwise. They were making multiple misjudgments in their partiality.

James addresses this issue amid a difficult time because it was an important issue, it must have been happening, and hardship tends to intensify self-protection. Partiality tends to grow when self-interest is rising.

Now let's take a look at the first question.

1) What Is Partiality?

It's important to start with a definition and then we'll expand and look at the context. In James 2:1, we see the word "partiality" used. Other translations, including the NIV and CSB, translate the word as "favoritism." You could also think of it as a "respector of persons," which raises an issue that we'll come back to since sometimes some people deserve honor and should be shown it.

In James, the original word means “to receive the face.”¹ It involves making external judgments or evaluations based upon a person’s perception and judgment. In this context, it carries the idea of favoring one group over others (i.e., rich over poor).

James illustrates this in our text. He creates the scenario where a wealthy man wears particular clothing (v. 2) that causes people to pay attention (v. 3) to him while neglecting the poor man. The effect is that one makes a distinction and judges with evil thoughts (v. 4). That’s why other words for this could be bias or prejudice.

Partiality makes unfair judgments and takes unjust actions.

In James 2, he illustrates unjust actions with the seating of the poor man on the floor (v. 3) and the statement about the poor man being dishonored (v. 6). James highlights unfair judgments with statements not only about being a judge with evil thoughts (v. 4), but also when he mentions God’s affirmation of the poor (v. 5), the common practice of the oppression of the poor by the rich (v. 6), and the blasphemy that was common among the rich (v. 7).

Now, we’re not entirely sure what the situation was in James’ day. New Testament scholar, Doug Moo, suggests the following:

*Palestinian, or at any rate Jerusalem, believers seem to have been particularly afflicted: the Antioch church sent relief to them during a famine in about AD 46, and later Paul collected money from his Gentile churches to send to the ‘poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem’ (cf. Rom. 15:26). The strongly marked socio-economic class distinction presupposed in James corresponds closely to what we know of conditions in first-century Palestine. A small group of wealthy landowners and merchants accumulated more and more power, while large numbers of people were forced from their land and grew even poorer. Most of James’ readers probably belonged to this class of poor agricultural labourers.*²

In other words, the partiality was materially wrong because of God’s love for the poor, and it was circumstantially wrong because of the experience of the church at the hands of rich people.

In the Old Testament, we find the same concern with partiality. The Hebrew word means to lift up the face of another. It’s the “incorrect discrimination or preference of making judgments based on factors other than the facts pertinent to a just decision. . .”³ The word has particular application as it relates to judicial proceedings.

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, [“Respect of Persons,”](#) *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1838–1839.

² Douglas J. Moo, [James: An Introduction and Commentary](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 125.

³ James Swanson, [Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew \(Old Testament\)](#) (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

He appointed judges in the land in all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city, and said to the judges, "Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD. He is with you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes" (2 Chron. 19:5–7).

Partiality is a perversion of justice. It negatively affects decisions in a way that it out-of-step with God's standard for justice or righteousness.

Partiality makes unfair judgments and takes unjust actions.

Now, remember what I asked you to do at the beginning of this sermon? I asked you not to jump too far ahead with the application because I'm going to make this a bit more complicated. But for now, can I just remind you that every one of us makes judgments based upon what we see or perceive. The only question I'd like you to think about is this: where am I more inclined to make unfair judgments?

I hope that you wouldn't say, "I always make fair judgments." Surely you know that for any number of reasons, perhaps even good ones, you are inclined to make snap judgments about groups of people. Please resist the temptation to think that partiality is everyone else's problem. All of us are tempted to make unfair judgments which can result in unjust actions.

2) When Is Partiality Sinful?

I probably don't have to convince you that partiality is sinful. We all have an internal "fairness" meter within ourselves. But we do have to nuance this a bit. This is where things get complicated.

In James 2, we read that the kind of partiality that James addresses involves errors:

1. Selfish judgment – deciding based on self-concern (v. 4)
2. Improper value assessment – evaluating the poor man as less valuable (v. 6)

First, sinful partiality is selfish. If you skip ahead to 2:8, you'll see that partiality is really about a selfish lack of love for your neighbor. Partiality loves us more than others.

It should be obvious, but the reason the rich man is given partial treatment is because of the power connected to his wealth. His appearance is designed to say something about his wealth, and the desirability of favor with wealthy man creates the opportunity for partiality.

Secondly, sinful partiality violates biblical justice. In the Old Testament, there are many verses that talk about sinful partiality related to justice. I referenced one before in 2 Chronicles. Here's another:

You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Deut. 16:18–20).

Notice that partiality violates God's standard of justice. And this applies to everyone. Judicial partiality to the wealthy is wrong, but judicial partiality to the poor is also wrong:

You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor (Lev. 19:15).

People are to be treated in a way that is connected to a divine standard of what is right. In the New Testament, we see the same principle applied to Paul's argument in Romans 2 regarding divine judgment: "God renders to each one according to his works. . ." (Rom. 2:6; 11). God shows no partiality in judgment (see also Col. 3:5).

This was also a warning. In Ephesians 6:9, masters are warned about their treatment of servants:

. . . knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Sinful partiality violates God's standard of justice.

Third, sinful partiality needs to be differentiated between honor and graciousness. The issue here is more than simply "fairness." Leviticus 19:32 commands respect for our elders – "honor the face of an old man." Younger men would be out of line if they felt that it was not fair when people didn't stand up for them. Further, the Bible commanded that the outer edges of fields should be left unharvested but that was reserved for "the poor and the sojourner" (Lev. 19:9-10). It wasn't for everyone.

Peter acknowledged in Acts 10:34 that the Gentiles should be able to receive the gospel and be part of the God's people – ". . . God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

We need to distinguish between honor, respect, appropriate kindness, and gospel identity. For example, treating guests with hospitality or grieving people with greater sensitivity isn't partiality. Being sure that those who feel like "outsiders" know that they are loved isn't partiality. It's kindness.

Sinful partiality makes unfair judgments and takes unjust actions. It succumbs to the promise of power and it selfishly attempts to gain something by treating people differently. Partiality uses divisions to get what we want.

Here in James 2, it was illustrated with the differentiation between how a wealthy person and a poor person.

Applications:

Next week, we'll pursue this even further, and we'll consider some additional biblical nuances. But let me invite you to consider two applications.

First, can I invite you to consider where partiality might be potentially tempting you or may be problematic in your life? In other words, which groups of people or which identity markers would cause you to stumble into partiality? What enamors you? Is it fame, power, wealth, intelligence, or social status? Where might you be inclined to be a respecter of persons? And what about the other direction? Which groups of people do you tend to judge quickly, write off, get angry quickly, or harbor bitterness toward?

Secondly, would you consider the dominant lens through which you see life right now? I'm asking you to consider, along with me, if your first step is the gospel—both what it is and what it does. Is your first step theological (who you are and what's important) or is it cultural and political?

I'm not saying that cultural and political issues aren't important. But I am saying that we need to get them in the right order of importance. Because we bring that order of importance to how we see the issue of fairness. And the value set we bring to the issue of fairness really matters.

Every parent knows the tension of trying to help their kids navigate issues of fairness. Issues connected to fairness provide an opportunity for us to live out what we really believe.

And it's an opportunity for the Church of Jesus Christ to live out the gospel in a way that shows that faith works.

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