

Faith Works: The Book of James

Poisonous Partiality – Part 2

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)

"That's not fair!"

It's a statement that I'm sure you knew was a part of our lives, but I would guess that if you were here last Sunday, you noticed it a bit more – both in your heart and in the world in which we live. To be human is to both intuitively know that fairness is important and to feel the pain and frustration when "fairness" isn't working.

I heard from a number of you about the conversations you had with your kids on the way home. Some kids wondered if their parents had "told the pastor on them," especially when I talked about how quickly "unfairness" can surface in high-pressure environments like a basketball game. I don't need to convince you that human beings—at every age—are deeply concerned about the issue of "fairness."

Tragically, even our best human attempts to create fair structures, policies, and judicial systems reflect the brokenness of our world. Fair is hard. Fair is complicated. "Fair" is fallen.

Thankfully, there is coming a day when there will be no questions about fairness. Jesus will reign as king over the New Heavens and the New Earth. The resurrected Son of God will rule out of righteousness, justice, and truth. Unfairness and partiality will be gone.

But we're not home yet. And the book of James calls the Church to be a small foretaste of our future glory by putting away the sin of partiality. In other words, one of the ways that faith works (the theme of chapters 2-3) is that our relationships are flavored with the gospel.

Reviewing the Four Crucial Questions

This sermon is the second half of our exploration of James 2:1-7, and last week we covered the first two of four questions:

- 1) What is partiality?
- 2) When is it sinful?
- 3) What does partiality look like?
- 4) How do we address it?

Allow me to review a few important points from last week.

First, let me remind you that the danger of this issue is making the charge of others with partiality more quickly than we take personal inventory. So, let's be sure we embrace Jesus's command in Matthew 7 to remove the log out of our own eyes first.

Secondly, let me remind you about the overall argument of James 2:1-7. In verse one, James 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, and it fits with the theme of faith and works in James.

The scenario that James provides is connected to a rich man being treated differently than a poor man. Verse four calls out the problem: ". . . have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" The issue in partiality is the disconnection between God's view of these men and how people are treating them.

The issue is made worse because of the inverted values of the kingdom (blessed are the poor) and culturally it was the rich who were making life difficult for these Christians. I suggested to you that this was happening in the church because hardship tends to intensify self-protection and partiality tends to grow when self-interest is rising.

Third, we covered two questions: (1) What is partiality? and (2) When is it sinful?

You could think of the word "partiality" as "receiving the face," being a respecter of persons, bias, or prejudice. Our working definition for partiality was "unfair judgments leading to unjust actions." It means to sinfully favor one group over another. That's what partiality is.

And it's sinful when it comes to self-interest because we use partiality to get what we want. It's often associated with power or protection. It's sinful when it violates biblical norms of justice. What is right and wrong should be applied fairly. But we need to be careful because it's easy to cite partiality when we're really just being honorable, hospitable, or kind.

So, this issue is important and it's complicated.

Let's explore two more questions as we try to determine how to think about unfair judgments that lead to unjust actions.

3. What Does Partiality Look Like?

I'd like to give you some biblical examples of where we find partiality so that we can see where it appears. Now it will be important to remember that these are not the only examples. We can find multiple examples.

First, let me make things a little complicated. Partiality is challenging because there are not only times when it's honorable. There are also times when making a judgment based upon a probability is the right thing to do. In fact, we make probability judgments all the time. Based upon what we see, what we sense, what we know, and what we experience, we are constantly making judgments. You have to do this in the world. Generalizations are a part of life.

If you are driving a car and you see a "Student Driver" sign, the presence of the sign is meant to caution you due to probabilities related to an inexperienced driver. Or, if you see a car behind you with flashing lights, the probabilities would cause you to pull over because it's a police officer. If a dog is roaming your neighborhood, and it looks mangey with a foaming mouth, you are probably keeping your kids inside.

What if you see a person you don't recognize walking around your neighborhood and something about his demeanor doesn't seem right. Or what if our security team notices a person walking around children's ministry in a way that raises a question. Is that partiality? Do you feel the tension?

John Piper states it this way:

Life is not really liveable without interpreting specific experiences in terms of the more general experience we have had...there is a fine line between legitimate probability judgments and sinful prejudice. It is a real line. God sees it even when we don't.¹

Nuance is so important. On the one hand, we can't say that everything is partiality and prejudice. Some probability judgments are necessary. On the other hand, we can't deny the reality of sinful partiality. What makes this even more complicated is that we bring our experience into this mess. If you've experienced partiality, it sticks with you. It hurts, it's traumatic, and it's hard not to feel it—even when it might not be true.

What's more, it's possible to hide partiality behind the veil of probability judgments. And I'm pleading with you to not apply this sermon to others. Again, John Piper:

To say what I am saying is very risky. It's risky because there will be some people who... in the hardness of their hearts, they will take my words about generalizing and probability judgments and use them as a cloak for their own prejudices. I know that.

But I take that risk because there is another group of people...who deep down know we already use this self-justification. We don't have names for it. We don't work at it. It just comes naturally, and it feels so legitimate. I am pleading with born-again people—real saints with remaining

¹ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/racism-prejudice-and-christ/>

corruption in our hearts—I am pleading that you read this and say, “Yes, thank you for helping me see the subtlety of my own sin. I must put this to death.

Secondly, what does partiality look like? It’s terribly sneaky. And complicated. And painful. What are some examples? My list is not meant to be exhaustive:

Wealth – We touched on this last week, but it’s good to repeat it because it’s all over the Bible. Someone’s wealth or lack of it should not affect how they are treated (Lev. 16:18-20).

Position – It’s possible for someone’s position in life to create partiality. “You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. . .” (Deut. 1:17). Jesus warned the disciples about the religious leaders and their love of greetings and special treatment when their hearts were far from God (Matt. 23:5-7).

Age - Timothy was commanded to treat older men as fathers and older women as mothers while at the same time not allowing people to look down on him because he was young (1 Tim 5:1; 4:12).

Family – We see great problems when parents are partial to particular children. We see major family problems due to Isaac’s preference for Esau and Rebekah’s preference for Jacob (Gen. 25:27-28). And we see the same thing with Jacob’s treatment of Joseph (37:3).²

Cultural - After Pentecost Sunday, where the gospel was proclaimed to people from all over the world (Acts 2:5-13), the church developed a program for meeting the needs of widows. However, the Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists), those who lived outside of Jerusalem, were being neglected. Whether it was intentional or not, the apostles addressed the issue by appointing people from this culture to be sure that the needs were met.

Ethnicity – I’m sure you know that eventually, we’d have to get here. The two most common forms of partiality in the Bible are based upon wealth and ethnicity. And the reason why prejudice and racism are sinful is because they are examples of ethnic partiality. Let me give you three examples of where we see it.

Acts 10-11 – After receiving a vision from the Lord, Peter preaches to the household of Cornelius and a number of Gentiles are converted and are filled with Holy Spirit. His conclusion was, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality. . .” (Acts 10:34). But Peter is later criticized by the Jewish leaders based upon their man-made traditions and their ethnocentrism (11:1-3). Thankfully, they change their perspective (:18).

Galatians 2 – This is probably the best example. The setting is Antioch, the first truly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic church. The city itself was divided into various sections based upon

² For an explanation on what might be perceived as partiality on God’s part in divine election (Romans 9:6-18) see <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-election-divine-favoritism>

ethnicity and culture, and this church plant is the first place where the name “Christian” is used. The church wasn’t Jewish. It wasn’t Gentile. It was both. And a new name was needed.

According to Galatians 2:11-21, Paul records a confrontation of Peter where he allowed ethnic partiality to take precedent over his commitment to the gospel. In verse 2:12, Peter removed himself from eating with the Gentiles (a cultural marker of equality and fellowship) when some Jews from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch. He feared the Jews. He wanted to be accepted by them, and his behavior affected Barnabas.

The result was a public confrontation because “their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). In other words, Peter’s partiality violated the gospel. Some might have said, “Look, it’s just a meal. What’s the big deal?” But Paul wouldn’t have it. Ethnic partiality runs contrary to the gospel.

In the book of Colossians, Paul said: “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:11). In other words, central to the beauty of what the gospel does is the way it gets underneath our most strident categories that tend to create partiality.

Every kind of partiality is wrong, but ethnic partiality is especially painful because it violates the plan for the gospel in Revelation 7:9 (“...a multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples, and languages”). And it diminishes the value of the image of God.

Partiality expresses itself wherever human beings are prone toward self-exaltation, self-protection, or self-preservation. Partiality is connected to pride and power. And every Christian in every culture in every era of Church history needs to wrestle with where partiality may be expressing itself.

We must ask ourselves where partiality is more likely to be expressed in our lives.

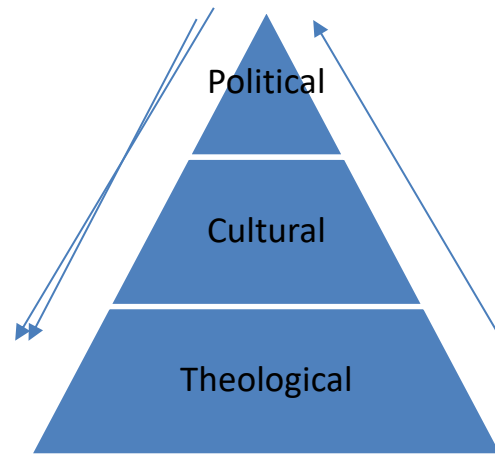
4. How Do We Address Partiality?

I realize that this subject is heavy and complicated. There are many layers, and I’m sure I’ve not answered all your questions. But let me chart a path forward with a few steps:

Gospel – We must see life through the power of the gospel first. The only solution for the self-focused, self-protecting, self-exalting sinfulness that expresses itself in every form of partiality is the transforming power of the grace of God. That’s why James says that we are to have “no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ...” (Jam. 2:1).

Church - The gospel has the power to make us a different kind of people together. The beauty of the church is the gospel culture that gets underneath all other cultures, and a gospel identity that gets underneath all other identities. “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...and reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (Eph. 2:14; 16). We have to work hard to get our Christian identity underneath our socio-

economic status, our positions in life, our cultural backgrounds, and our ethnicities. I need to value people and relationships through this Christian identity lens. In this respect, the theological-cultural-political framework is important in determining how we approach this issue.



Humility – We need to apply Matthew 7 to our lives realizing and acknowledging where partiality can occur. For example when:

- We treat all the members of a group as if all must be characterized by a negative (or positive) generalization
- We speak negatively of a group based on a generalization without giving any evidence that we acknowledge and appreciate the exceptions
- We speak disparagingly of an entire group on the basis of a negative generalization without any personal regard for those in the group who don't fit the generalization³

And we need humility to realize the possibility of doing that. Sometimes it's because we're fearful. At other times, it's because of our experience or pain. At other times, it's just merely because we're sinful.

Love – Partiality is personal. Let me encourage you to find ways through relationships to learn about the experiences of people who feel "other." Before you jump to a defensive position, do your part to weep with those who weep. One of the reasons I've spent time trying to help Christians who look like me grow in our understanding of the experience of our minority brothers is not because ethnic partiality is the only issue. Nor is it because I think ethnic partiality is a worse sin than other areas.

Rather it comes from a perspective that the learning curve is greater; the grade is steeper; and, historically, churches filled with people who look like me have ignored or, in some cases, encouraged ethnic partiality. So if I'm going to err, I want to err on the side of listening when that hasn't been the

³ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/racism-prejudice-and-christ/>

case historically. I know that needs to be kept in balance. Some of you might think I'm sometimes not balanced. But my heart's desire is to be sure that the church looks more like heaven now.

Courage – Partiality is hard because it takes courage to identify and work for change. You saw that in Galatians 2. And yet it requires people who love Jesus's vision for the advance of the gospel so much that they won't stand for the marginalization of groups of people.

And when they hear about it, they work to bring change.

"That's not fair" is a charge we've all heard and said. It's a part of the world in which we live. But Jesus's vision for the church is to be a place where gospel-centered relationships transcend the typical divisions in our world.

When you love Jesus, you love justice. You want to see an end to unfair judgments and unfair treatment wherever it is. Because you know that partiality is poison.

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