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James #8
September 13, 2015

The Poison of Partiality and Prejudice

James 2:1-13

All of us know that some sins are more conspicuous and overt than others. Public drunkenness, for example, or profane speech are readily identifiable. It's obvious to even the casual observer if someone is intoxicated. The same is true of obscene or profane speech. If you have eyes and ears you can know instantly whether such sins are being committed.

Other sins, however, are more covert and secret. People seem to get away with adultery more times than not. Unless you are an actual eye-witness to adultery, it's hard to prove. This is even more so the case with sins like jealousy or envy or bitterness or lust. Typically we wouldn't know if someone is failing in these ways unless they tell us about their internal struggles.

I mention this today because of what I read in James 2:1-13. I may be wrong, but my sense is that, in 2015, ***the most secret sin of all may well be that of partiality and prejudice***. I say it is secret not only because it can't be seen or smelled or touched but especially because we are passionately committed to denying that it even exists. People who readily confess that they struggle with lust or unforgiveness or bitterness will rarely be honest enough to admit that they are prejudiced towards people of a different ethnicity or socio-economic group.

This sin is not only secret, but also sinister. It's hard to think of a sin within that is more wicked and contrary to the will of God than ***the feelings of superiority and condescension we have toward people who are different from us***. We look at those whose skin color is different from ours and conclude that they are for that reason alone inferior in some way to us; they are of less value; they should be treated with less respect and shown less honor. Or we look at the way they dress or the way they talk and inwardly turn up our noses because they lack the sophistication in which we take pride. Or we think of the schools they've attended, or perhaps the schools into which they were denied acceptance. Or we secretly question their common sense or intellectual skills because of where they live. And the list could go on endlessly.

My point is simply that *there is hardly a more vicious and un-Christian energy in the human soul than that of prejudice and the resultant partiality and discrimination with which we treat people who don't measure up to our standards.*

James pulls no punches in addressing this here in chapter two of his letter. He has some fairly harsh and pointed things to say about people who are prejudiced and show partiality. They are said to have *“evil thoughts”* (v. 4); they *“dishonor”* (v. 6) others; they are *“committing sin”* and are *“transgressors”* of the law (v. 9).

Why is this so? I mean, why is it such a heinous and grievous thing to hold prejudice in your heart and then to treat others with partiality? The answer is found elsewhere in Scripture and it relates to *the character of God himself*. In Romans 2:11 Paul says that *“God shows no partiality.”* In that context he's talking about God's just and righteous treatment of both Jews and Gentiles and his point is that the distinction between them in terms of ethnicity doesn't register in God's heart.

Again, in Acts 10:34 Peter declares that anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him because *“God shows no partiality.”* In Ephesians 6:9 Paul commands masters to treat their bondservants with fairness and kindness because with God *“there is no partiality.”* That is to say, God doesn't treat masters better than or worse than their servants simply because one is a master and the other his servant. God doesn't operate on the basis of a double standard depending on your socio-economic status or the color of your skin or the blood in your veins. *And therefore neither should we!* In other words, to pass judgment on the basis of *external considerations*, to discriminate on the basis of racial or socio-economic factors is contrary to the character and behavior of God and must therefore be absent from the lives of those who profess to be his children.

The problem James is addressing in chapter two is the reality of prejudice and the resultant lack of impartiality in how we treat people based on their *socio-economic status*. And in light of what we just saw in Romans 2:11 and Acts 10:34 *I think we are justified in extending the nature of this prejudice to issues of race or ethnicity as well.* The word translated “partiality” in James 2:1 is the same word found in both Romans 2:11 and Acts 10:34.

Therefore I think James would be perfectly happy for us to apply the principles of this exhortation not only to the prejudice we experience with regard to social, economic, and financial status but also to racial or ethnic prejudice as well. *How we treat others, whether with honor or dishonor, respect or disrespect, should never be based on riches or race.*

So let's look closely at the scenario that he describes for us in vv. 1-7.

An Illustration of Prejudice and Partiality

The scenario James describes in these opening verses is easy to understand. Two men (or women) walk into your church gathering and you immediately notice the differences between them. One is decked out in the finest of clothes and the most expensive of jewelry. The other is dressed in old and dirty clothes and is obviously lacking in financial resources. It becomes obvious from the start that one is more likely to give generously to the church than the other. One is more likely to be of benefit to you than the other. And so you lead the wealthy man or woman to the best seats in the house and you treat them with kindness and respect. But the poor man or woman is marginalized and pushed off to the side and may not even be given a seat but rather shown a place on the floor, over against the wall or in the corner where they might sit.

It's important that we not draw the wrong conclusions from this illustration. So let me draw your attention to several things James is **not** saying to us.

Drawing the Wrong Conclusions

(1) James is not saying that we should ignore the rich as if they had no business being at the corporate assembly of God's people. Wealth does not disqualify someone from attendance on Sunday or during the course of the week. ***He is not saying that Christianity is only for the poor.*** We must be careful lest we discriminate against the rich in favor of the poor, in the same way that the people of James' day discriminated against the poor in favor of the rich.

James wants us to treat all alike, without any consideration for socio-economic factors whatsoever. In other words, ***he is not saying that showing kindness and courtesy to rich people is wrong.*** It is wrong only when we do it to the exclusion and detriment of the poor. We must show both equal consideration and courtesy.

(2) We must also remember that ***whereas James is denouncing sinful snobbery in which we cater to the wealthy, he could just as easily have denounced that condescending humility in which we falsely pity the poor.*** God wants us to avoid both extremes. We should neither identify with the rich and look with disdain upon the poor, nor identify with the poor and look with indignation upon the rich.

(3) Furthermore, James is not denouncing all rich people any more than he is praising all poor people. ***There is no inherent virtue in poverty nor is there any inherent vice in wealth.*** As James says in v. 5, one can be physically poor in this world but spiritually rich in the next. You

may inherit nothing in this life at the same time you are made an heir of the kingdom of God! He will also say later on in the epistle that one can be physically rich in this world but spiritually poor in the next (i.e., lost and separated from God!). But it is also possible to be physically poor in this world and spiritually poor in the next (not all poor people are saved). Likewise one can be physically rich in this world and spiritually rich in the next (some rich people are saved).

(4) Also, ***James is not denouncing all forms of discrimination***. He does not want us to be morally undiscerning. Here he is denouncing discrimination in the church that is based on non-moral grounds. That is to say, he opposes showing personal favoritism in the church to people according to race, wealth, social rank, and popularity.

I don't want to be misunderstood when I say this, but ***at times discrimination is absolutely essential*** and is not morally sinful. If you are going to hire someone to watch your home while on vacation, you probably wouldn't hire the person who has seven prior felony theft convictions. You would more likely hire the person with a spotless record who comes highly recommended. James isn't saying we shouldn't take into consideration someone's moral or criminal background.

Again, if the two people described in James 2 applied for work in your company, it is always possible that the poor man has very little education and lacks the skills that would make him suitable for the job in question, while the rich man has both. You are discriminating between the two even though it is on grounds other than their comparative wealth. You are discriminating in the sense that you are making an evaluation as to which man is better qualified or suited to the job in question. Neither their wealth nor race has any relevance for the job in question, but their education and skill set do. James wants us to understand that education and social rank and wealth and ethnicity are irrelevant to a person's moral dignity, individual worth, or acceptance and standing with God. God loves and redeems the uneducated and the genius, the rich and the poor, the black and the white, the Asian and the Hispanic, etc.

(5) ***We should not interpret James as if he's saying that it is wrong to give honor to whom honor is due***. See Philippians 2:29. The grounds on which Paul "honors" Epaphroditus are moral and spiritual. He has a proven record of righteousness and self-sacrifice. Paul commanded the Philippians (and us) to "honor" men like Epaphroditus. If you do, that doesn't mean you have sinfully discriminated against those who aren't deserving of honor. James' point is that we must never give preferential treatment to someone based on physical appearance or the size of their bank account.

So don't be afraid to congratulate someone for an accomplishment. Don't be hesitant to point out to others the spiritual growth of a particular person.

(6) *James is not saying that it is wrong or sinful for wealthy people to wear their jewelry or fashionable clothes to church, any more than he is telling poor people that they should deliberately dressed in ragged and dirty way.* Some people dress worse than they have to as an act of rebellion against the cultural trends of their day or as a symbolic expression of their disdain for the establishment or even as an expression of false piety, hoping to evoke pity for themselves. Similarly, some wealthy people overdress to be noticed, to show off, to let everyone know just how well they have succeeded in this life.

James couldn't care less how you dress as long as you do so with propriety, dignity, and modesty.

(7) Finally, *James is not telling the poor to come to church ragged and disheveled even if they have the opportunity to improve their lot in life. Nor is he telling the rich to dress down and hide their wealth as if it is something of which they should be ashamed.*

What James is saying is that as long as you did not become poor because of sloth and negligence or rich because of deceit and theft, your socio-economic status is absolutely irrelevant in the eyes of God and should be equally irrelevant in the eyes of the church. James wants us to treat others the way God has treated us, which is to say, without regard for any external, financial, physical features.

A Closer Look at the Poor and the Rich

Are these people in James 2 hypothetical or actual? Probably the latter. They are undoubtedly visitors or newcomers because they are portrayed as needing to be told where to sit.

The phrase “wearing a gold ring” literally means “gold-fingered” and is used only here in the NT. He means someone who has multiple gold rings, which in the first century was typically a sign of the aristocracy and great wealth. Again, he isn't saying it's wrong to wear expensive jewelry or that if someone does we should ignore them when they walk in or escort them to the back of the auditorium. His point is that we must be careful not to let those with gold rings and expensive garments blind us to the needs of those who are less well off. Simply put, bling counts for nothing in the kingdom of God!

The phrase “*pay attention to*” in v. 3 means that you give special consideration to or look with admiration upon a person solely because of their external appearance. The converse is equally true: if you look away from or with disdain upon those who come to your service wearing what

may perhaps be the only shirt or dress or pair of jeans they own, in both cases you have “become judges with evil thoughts” (v. 4b).

In 18th century New England they often violated James’ counsel in amazing ways. In the church of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts, seating was not first come first served but was assigned on the basis of such things as age, gender, social and military rank, and community service. When they constructed a new building in 1737 they assigned the best seats based on a man’s estate, that is, his income and property holdings. The wealthier citizens were given preferential seating while the poor were relegated to sitting in the gallery and back pews. I should point out that Jonathan Edwards was adamantly opposed to such arrangements but was outvoted.

So why are people inclined to behave in this way? What is going on beneath the surface that inclines our hearts to prejudice and to giving preferential treatment to people for the wrong reasons?

One reason people treat poor people poorly is because they know that they are unable to be of service to us materially and socially. In fact, the only thing they might do is embarrass us in the presence of others whose respect we so deeply cherish. Conversely, we exalt and praise and pamper the rich in order to ingratiate ourselves to them so that we might profit from their influence and power.

I once heard someone say that ***greatness in a man or woman is seen or measured in the sacrifice and love and generosity they display towards those who are in no position to do them any personal good whatsoever.*** In other words, the good man or woman is the one who goes to great lengths to bless those who are in no position to be of benefit to them in the least.

So why, then, do we cater to the rich and powerful and ignore the poor and weak? ***Greed and pride!*** And why do greed and pride prevail in our hearts? ***Unbelief!*** Unbelief in the transitory nature of riches and power; unbelief in the tenuous nature of reputation and fame; unbelief in the ultimate superiority of spiritual wealth to material wealth; the failure or refusal to believe that when we have Jesus Christ we have all that is needed for joy and peace and value in life.

Reasons why we must not feel Prejudice or show Partiality

Let me mention five reasons that are found in vv. 1-7. There are others in vv. 8-13 that we’ll look at next week.

First, prejudice and partiality are inconsistent with our faith in Jesus Christ as the Lord of Glory (v. 1)! Don't overlook how James describes Jesus in v. 1. Why does he use this unusual descriptive phrase? Why the emphasis on Jesus as the Lord of "**Glory**"?

The likely answer is that *at the heart of prejudice is our own craving for glory and honor and praise*. We want powerful and wealthy and influential people to take notice of us and we want to avoid the embarrassment that comes from being associated with weak and impoverished and inconsequential people. We crave glory from others, and we strive to avoid the loss of it. So we show partiality or give preferential treatment to those we believe can provide us with glory and avoid those who we fear might undermine it.

James wants us to see that if we know and love and trust in all that God is for us in Jesus, who is himself the Lord of all Glory, we won't be controlled by the craving for human praise and acceptance. If Christ is himself our glory he is all the glory we need. If Christ is himself the security our souls so desperately desire, we won't seek it in what others can supply.

So, ask yourself why you seek the favor and approval of powerful and wealthy people and why you avoid association with those who you mistakenly believe are beneath you. Why do you feel drawn to one group and repelled by the other? Is it not because of your craving for glory and recognition and the comforts of life that you think some might provide? But if you genuinely know who Jesus is and walk daily in confident trust in him and all that he is and will be for you, if you draw moment by moment on the strength and security and joy and peace that he provides, what possible place would prejudice have in your heart?

I would also suggest that James has in mind the reference he makes in v. 2 to "gold rings" and "fine clothing". It's as if he says: "Do you think that glory resides in man's earthly financial gain? Do you think glory is found in the weight, worth, and glisten of gold, and in the shiny, silky, fashionable clothing of those who visit your church? Please! The only glory that is glory indeed is in Jesus!" [By the way, I find it instructive that the word translated "fine" in the phrase "fine clothing" actually means shiny and bright.]

Second, to show partiality toward the rich by granting them preferential treatment, or to harbor prejudice in your heart toward someone of another ethnicity, is to set yourself up as "judges with evil thoughts" (v. 4). But you and I aren't judges! Only God is. Who do we think we are passing judgment on the worth or value of another human being based on some external factor, be it wealth, rank, popularity, or skin color? You and I must never usurp a role and right that belongs only to God by elevating ourselves to such a lofty position. We have no right to envision ourselves sitting behind the bench, passing judgment on who is of greater value and who is of

lesser value, who is deserving of our attention and who is not. To do so is to be guilty of “evil thoughts” (v. 4b).

Later in James 4:12 he will say this: “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”

Third, prejudice and partiality are inconsistent with the heart of God himself as seen in his choice of the poor to inherit eternal life (v. 5). To harbor prejudice in your heart is to belittle God and his sovereign work of saving whom he will. To put it bluntly, “if we are ashamed of the poor, we are ashamed of God, because God is not ashamed to choose the poor” (Piper, *Bloodlines*, 186). Perhaps the best commentary on James 2:5 is 1 Corinthians 1:26-29. There the apostle Paul says this:

“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

When Paul speaks of the “wise” and “powerful” and those of “noble birth” and the “foolish” and the “weak” he has in mind *classes* of people. There are obvious exceptions. As a general rule God has chosen the foolish and the weak rather than the wise and the powerful, at least in terms of how the world judges wisdom and power. He does not say that God did not choose “any” wise and powerful and wealthy but that he has not chosen “many”.

God’s motive in this was so that no one could boast about being chosen. His desire was to orchestrate salvation so that everyone would be compelled to acknowledge that he alone is deserving of praise and glory.

So again, neither Paul nor James is suggesting that all poor people will be saved or that all rich people will be lost. Their point is that material poverty and material riches have no influence whatsoever on God’s electing choice. The poor are not at a disadvantage to the rich and the rich are not a leg up on the poor when it comes to experiencing God’s favor. And if that is true, what possible reason could we have for holding one in higher regard over the other? What possible reason could we have for treating one with contempt and the other with generosity?

Fourth, prejudice and partiality not only dishonor God by usurping his role as judge but they also dishonor the poor who are created in his image. “But you have dishonored the poor man” (James 2:6a). All humans, not just the poor but also the rich, are to be treated with the honor and dignity that comes with being created and fashioned in the image of God (see 3:9).

Fifth, prejudice and partiality cater to the very people who themselves oppress and treat with injustice the people of God (vv. 6-7).

In the first century context in which James wrote and his audience lived, many among the rich were oppressive in their treatment of the poor. Not all, mind you, but many, if not most. There were probably more poor people in the kingdom of God and they were especially vulnerable to exploitation and injustice on the part of the wealthy and powerful. Here is what James says about it in James 5:4-6 –

“Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you” (James 5:4-6).

That being the case, says James, why would you single out for special treatment and flattery the very people who are most responsible for the violent oppression of Christian men and women? The rich would take advantage of their money and influence to bribe the courts to render favorable verdicts and to deprive the poor of their rights. The rich were predominantly, not exclusively mind you, but predominantly the very ones who blasphemed the name of Jesus Christ. How ridiculous and inconsistent for you to cater to their needs and whims and overlook the obvious needs and pain of the poor in your midst.

Conclusion

Prejudice and partiality, whether based on racial or socio-economic grounds won't go away easily. Many today mistakenly think that the answer to prejudice in the human heart is legislation. Now, don't misunderstand me. In many instances there must be legal steps taken to protect the rights and dignity of certain individuals who are at a disadvantage through no fault of their own.

Some insist that affirmative action is called for when it comes to the grounds for admission into our colleges and universities. Others believe that monetary reparations should be made or that

wealth should be redistributed in some fashion. I'm not here to pass judgment one way or the other on such measures. Certainly I hope we would all agree that ***any and all forms of segregation along racial and socio-economic lines must be eradicated.***

But my point is this: ***not all the legislation in the world can transform the passions and dispositions of the human heart.*** We can implement new laws and regulations and hiring procedures and countless other steps to overcome the inequalities that exist in our society. But if prejudice and partiality are ever to be overcome and defeated ***there must first be a work of God's grace in the human heart.***

Although much could be said of this, let me mention only one thing. The first and most important step to take is to realize and embrace and act upon the simple truth that ***all men and women are created in the image of God, and for that reason alone are endowed with dignity and worth not only in the eyes of their Creator but also in ours as well.*** When you look upon a rich man or a poor woman, an African-American teen-ager or a Wall Street executive, a baby in the womb or a Hispanic crossing the border into Texas, you are looking on people shaped and fashioned in the image of our great God and Creator. In saying that I'm not making a political statement. I'm making a theological and spiritual statement. And until such time as you and I feel the force of this truth in our hearts, we will never win the war against prejudice and partiality.