

Copyright Geist Christian Church, April 21, 2024

Series Title: James: Life Lessons

Sermon Title: Don't Play Favorites

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Today, we begin a four-week look at the New Testament book of James. About 90 years ago, scholar E. F. Scott wrote the following sentence regarding the book of James: “There is no writing in the New Testament on which critical opinion has varied so widely as on this Epistle.”¹ That view of James is as right today as it was then. For example, the author identified himself as James, or Jacob in Hebrew, in the first sentence of the book, but we don’t know which James. For centuries, Christian tradition took it for granted that the author was James, the brother of Jesus. This James was the head of the emerging Christian community in Jerusalem

Today, most mainstream scholars do not think the author was the brother of Jesus. He never identifies himself that way, and if I were the brother of Jesus writing something, I probably would at least mention it to gain some credibility. Add to that that this author’s use of the Greek language and grammar is quite sophisticated—not impossible for a brother of Jesus from the peasant class in Nazareth whose native language was Aramaic—but somewhat unlikely. There is little in this writing that is overtly theological. There is nothing about the death and resurrection of Jesus and nothing about doctrines that are to be believed.² Who wrote James is ultimately less important than what’s in it. As I sometimes say in Bible studies, that’s all interesting information, but it’s not the point.

The focus of the Book of James is primarily practical, combining wisdom about how to live with an indictment of how people were living. Half of James’s 108 verses are commands about living. There is an emphasis on doing and acting. Two of the best-known passages from James are “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (James 1:22) and “faith without works is dead” (James 2:17). We’ll cover that

¹ Scott, Ernest Findlay, *The Literature of the New Testament*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1932, p. 210.

² Borg, Marcus J., *Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2012, p.193-94.

second one next week. It's that second one that led reformer Martin Luther to call the book of James "an epistle of straw" and called for it to be thrown out of the Bible. Luther thought James put too much emphasis on our "works" as Christians and not enough on our "faith" as Christians. I had someone tell me this week that James is their favorite book in the Bible, and Luther wanted it thrown out of the Bible. That's how varied opinions are on James.

In the first chapter, by way of introduction, the author draws out a vision of faithfulness to God in which we demonstrate our fidelity by reflecting God's character in our lives. Whereas life apart from God succumbs to desire, readers are urged to adopt their identity as true children of God by living out what they believe. Their steadfast faithfulness should be manifest in their action on behalf of widows, orphans, and the needy for whom God has shown particular care.

Then we get to specific examples with our reading today at the start of chapter two. This section talks about playing favorites. Last week, April 10 to be exact, was National Siblings Day. If you have siblings, you might playfully kid around saying that your parents played favorites among you. I called my brother on National Siblings Day. I'm the small cute one. He likes to say that I was the favorite. While I want to be in denial about that, it's hard to dispute since I was a perfect child. (I really hope he watches the recording). In reality, I was a bit of surprise for my parents, and I think they were just tired by the time I came along.

James is not talking about playful banter of playing favorites between siblings. He's talking about a more serious form of favoritism—what today we might call discrimination. This kind of favoritism is incompatible with our faith. When we play favorites, writes James, we "discriminate and become judges." And when we judge, we've put ourselves in the place of God, which is idolatry. We judge, discriminate, and play favorites for many reasons—race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, intelligence, politics, and nationality all come to mind.

James uses the example of early Christians who favored the rich over the poor. One day when their worship service was just getting started, two people walked in. One of them clearly had much money that he had spent on himself. He may even have smelled a bit like money. The other person was obviously poor, with little money to spend on his clothing or personal hygiene.

Since it wasn't a very big assembly, everyone could see what happened. Everyone watched the head usher make a big deal of the rich man. He enthusiastically greeted him, gave him a bulletin—it doesn't say that they had bulletins; I'm making that part up—and showed him a good seat that he may even have held for him until he arrived. Perhaps the usher even elbowed a few people out of the way to make a place for the rich man.

However, the same usher indicated that there was no place in the assembly for the poor man to sit. He might have told him there weren't any bulletins left. He certainly told him that all the seats were so full that he'd have to stand somewhere in the back near the door. We can almost see the head usher tripping all over himself to shove the poor guy out of view and onto the "back of the bus."

The irony is not lost on the writer of James: "Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?" (James 2:6b-7). Garry Wills puts it perfectly in his book *What Jesus Meant*. He says, "God in his lavish and indiscriminate love never excludes people because they are unclean, unworthy, or disrespectful. Nor should we. No outcasts were cast out far enough in Jesus's world to make him shun them."³ Playing favorites is easy; loving indiscriminately is hard.

Sandor Teszler knew what it meant to not play favorites in a time when playing favorites was expected. Teszler left Hungary for the United States after escaping from a concentration camp with his family in the early part of World War II. Trained as a textile worker, he made his way to Spartanburg, South Carolina, which had long been a center of the textile industry. In the 1950s, after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Mr. Teszler became anxious as he saw the rise and the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan and as he heard the racist rhetoric around him begin to intensify. He recognized it from his days in Europe, and he could not simply ignore it for the sake of business. He went to his foreman and asked where the racial tensions were most hostile in the area. The foreman replied that he wasn't sure where the worst was, but it couldn't get much worse than around King's Mountain. Mr. Teszler announced that day that he would be building a new factory in King's Mountain.

When word got out, the white mayor of King's Mountain came to see Mr. Teszler, asking if he planned to hire white workers. Mr. Teszler told him to recruit the best workers he could find, and if they were good enough, he would hire them. Shortly thereafter, the black pastor of a large African-American church came to Mr. Teszler and expressed his hope that Mr. Teszler would be hiring black workers. Again, Mr. Teszler encouraged him to find the best workers he could, and if they were good enough, he would hire them.

In the end, Sandor hired 16 new employees: 8 white and 8 black. In the mill, there was one bathroom, one set of showers, one water fountain. After initial introductions and a tour of the plant were complete, one white worker boldly asked, "Is this gonna be some kind of integrated plant?" Mr. Teszler replied, "You are being paid twice as much as any other textile worker in the area. You can work with us here in the way we work, or you can go somewhere else. Any other questions?" There were none, and all 16 employees stayed.

Several months later, the plant had grown in production such that a new group of employees was hired. And after their tour, the same question was raised by a white worker: "Is this some kind of integrated plant?" And this time, the white foreman replied, "You are being paid twice as much as any other textile worker in the area. You can work with us here in the way we work, or you can go somewhere else. Any other questions?" Because Sandor Teszler didn't play favorites and dared to stand in a place that was dangerous and uncomfortable but oh so right, an entire industry was integrated.⁴

³ Wills, Garry. *What Jesus Meant*, Penguin Publishing Group; Reprint edition, 2007.

⁴ www.ted.com, The life-long learner by Bernie Dunlap, March 2007.

James calls us not to choose between rich and poor, not to choose between black and white, not to choose between young and old, first world and third world, free and imprisoned, sick and healthy, naked and clothed, hungry and fed. In the end, these are all false dichotomies, for we are all children of God. James calls us to stand with the cross of Jesus Christ, to take up residence in the gap between what is and what should be. To profess a faith that stands anywhere else is a false faith.

In an old *Peanuts* comic strip, Charlie Brown and Schroeder trudge through the snow bundled in fur hats, scarves, gloves, and boots. As they battle the elements, they see Snoopy, looking cold and miserable. Schroeder says to Charlie Brown, "Snoopy looks kind of cold, doesn't he?" to which Charlie Brown replies, "I'll say he does. Maybe we should go over and comfort him." When they get to Snoopy, they do nothing for the shivering dog but to tell him, "Be of good cheer." And Schroeder adds, "Yes, Snoopy, be of good cheer." They continue on their merry way, leaving Snoopy with a big question mark over his head.⁵

God won't just let James' readers walk past people in the margins. God reminds James's readers that true religion is not just a matter of what we believe or even the rituals we practice. God insists that true religion is also about how we treat each other, especially those whom society marginalizes. Religious practice on Sunday without faithful living the other six days of the week is basically worthless. Instead of faithfully receiving God's grace that grants eternal life, it perpetuates spiritual death.

Thankfully, then, the faith that God graciously gives God's adopted sons and daughters is a living faith. It's a faith that doesn't just say and know all the right things about God, God's world and God's creatures. James insists that the faith that God graciously gives us is a faith that, among other things, actively cares for others.

Jim Wallis tells the story of a woman who lives in his neighborhood by the name of Mary Glover. Mary helped distribute food in his church's weekly food line. She was one that needed a bag of groceries each week. Yet Mary was also a kind of leader of the food ministry; she often said its prayer before it opened its doors on Saturday mornings. She was, after all, the ministry's best pray-er. She was one of those people, says Wallis, "who pray like they know to whom they're talking."

Mary would generally begin by praying something like, "Thank you, Lord, for waking us up this morning! Thank you, Lord, that our walls were not our grave and that our bed was not our cooling board. Thank you, Lord!" However, Mary also prayed in a way that showed that God had shown her what was at stake in our treatment of people who are materially poor. After all, Mary always prayed: "Lord, we know that you'll be comin' through this line today, so, Lord, help us to treat you well."⁶

⁵ Cartoon can be found here: <https://bickleyhouse.wordpress.com/2011/11/19/be-of-good-cheer-snoopy/>

⁶ Wallis, Jim. Article "Lord, Help Us to Treat You Well," found in *Sojourners*, March 2, 2017. <https://sojo.net/articles/lord-help-us-treat-you-well>

Verses eight and nine of today's scripture really don't mince any words. "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors" (James 2:8-9). I guess I really didn't need to preach today. That's the sermon in two sentences.

Let me pray with you: "Thank you Lord for waking us up this morning. Lord, we know that we will meet you today so help us to treat you well. Amen."