

No Partiality

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[0 : 00] I grew up in a family where family photos and family portraits were a really big deal. As a kid, I remember always dreading that time of the year.

There's this dreadful day about the end of September or early October where my mother would finally make us change out of our shorts and t-shirt and put on some slacks, put on a shirt, and we'd go to some random meadow or some random cobblestone house, and we would start taking family photos.

We never liked it. We never enjoyed it. And if you take a tour through the house that my parents still live in, you can see basically my whole childhood from the age of four all the way up to about 18 because there are family photos from every single year painting all the walls.

Now, one of the things I realized is that, quite quickly, is how you frame a photo really matters for how you treat that photo, how you treat that portrait.

You could have kind of a thin, white, flimsy frame which shows that what's going on really isn't that important. Or you could have this kind of big, thick, hand-carved, wood-stained frame which would change completely the way that you are oriented towards that picture.

[1 : 25] So the type of frame that the picture is framed in actually shapes the way that we see, the way that we value, and the way that we relate to the people in the picture.

Now, in our passage today, in James chapter 2, verses 2 to 4, James shows us a picture of the church. He shows us a family portrait, if you will.

Verse 2 to 4. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man with 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, with evil intentions?

So we see that the family portrait is not very pretty right now. It's a divided family. It's a dysfunctional family. It's a judging family. A family where favoritism and discrimination and partiality are reigning, where the rich are favored over the poor.

Now, at this point, it would be really easy for us to look at this picture and say, that's not our family photo. We could read this description in verses 2 to 4 really quickly and distance ourselves from this passage and say, well, I don't really show partiality.

[3 : 03] We're not really like this. And in distancing ourselves from this passage, we could be exactly like the man that James describes in chapter 1, verse 24, where we look in a mirror and then we turn and walk away and forget what we looked like.

What James wants to do with us is he wants us to look at this picture and see a mirror and realize that the favoritism that we see in this passage actually lies deeply in our own hearts, in our own lives, in our own community.

James wants us to see what is so hard for us to see. And so we have to approach this passage with humble hearts in the words of the psalmist and say, search me, O God, and know my heart.

Try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any way grievous in me and lead me in the way everlasting. And when God searches our hearts, many favoritisms rise to the surface.

We have to ask ourselves, do we favor those who we think can offer us something over those that we think have nothing to offer us? Do we find it easy?

[4 : 17] Do we find ourselves being drawn towards those that are pleasant to be around and are easy for us to be around rather than those that test our patience and demand our effort? Do we favor those who are clever or witty or intelligent?

over those that have no education? Do we favor those that have high-paying jobs and social status over those that make minimum wage and go unnoticed?

Do we favor those that are long-term members of St. John's over those that are newcomers or visitors? Do we favor those that are married over those that are single or those that are single over those that are married?

Do we favor those that are old over those that are young or those that are young over those that are old? Or favoritism of a whole different nature? Do we favor people that struggle with particular sorts of sins, but not others?

So we're willing to walk with those that are struggling with greed, but not those that struggle with same-sex attraction. We're willing to walk with those who gossip, but not those who lust.

[5 : 28] We're willing to walk with those who are conceited, but maybe not those who are gripped by addiction. We're willing to walk with the rich, but are we willing to walk with the poor? And so James holds up a mirror to us, and we have to ask these searching questions, because when God looks in our hearts, he is not fooled.

He's not fooled. He sees it all. And so what James wants to do for us is he wants to take this portrait, and he wants to reframe it, so that we see ourselves, and we see each other, and we see the way we relate to each other differently.

James wants to reframe the way that we see each other and relate to each other. And so I'm going to walk us through this passage and take us to four points, four sides of this new frame.

It's God's glory, God's choice, God's law, and then God's judgment. God's glory, God's choice, God's law, God's judgment.

That is our new frame. So would you go to verse one with me? God's glory. James says, Here, James begins, and this is really important, he begins by drawing our attention to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[6 : 59] And this is really important, because James only explicitly mentions Jesus by name twice in the whole letter. So when he does, our ears perk up, and we have to listen. We have to pay attention.

And in particular here, he describes the Lord Jesus Christ in a very interesting way. He calls him the Lord of glory, or literally, the glory. Jesus Christ is the glory of the living God.

It's as if James is starting off this whole conversation about favoritism by saying, you want to know what true glory is? True glory is not the man that walks in wearing fine rings and fine clothing.

It's not worldly status and wealth. It's not the praise of kings and the applause of queens. True glory is the Lord Jesus Christ. The son of man who came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

That's true glory. True glory is that though he was rich for our sake, he became poor so that by his poverty, we might become rich. True glory is that although he was in the form of God, and he enjoyed eternal fellowship with the living God, he stepped down into our darkness and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross in our place.

[8 : 21] That is true glory. To love and to serve. And so James points us to the Lord of true glory, the Lord Jesus Christ, so that when we hold to the faith of this Lord, we realize that no longer do we see our glory in terms of upward social mobility, in terms of financial success, in terms of worldly status, but we see our glory in terms of Jesus in his ministry.

We see our glory in terms of love and service now. So that when somebody walks in the door with shabby clothing on, we consider it a joy to welcome them into our fellowship.

When somebody is socially outcast or on the outside of a community, it seems, we consider it our great privilege to get to love and serve that person and welcome them in.

Because that's exactly what the Lord of glory does. And we trust in that Lord of glory. And so James says to us, my brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

God's glory is the first side of the frame. The second side is God's choice. God's choice. Look at verse five. Listen, listen, my beloved brothers.

[9 : 49] I love the way James combines uncompromising conviction with pastoral tenderness. He says, listen, pay attention, my beloved brothers and sisters.

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? And the implied answer to James question is yes.

Yes, he has. God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world. And James wants us to see that any partiality or favoritism in our life or community absolutely contradicts the gospel.

It absolutely contradicts God's loving choice of the poor. James is basically saying to us, who are you to look down upon the very ones that I have chosen to serve?

Who are you to dishonor the very ones that I have chosen to honor? Don't you know that God's mercy overflows? That his heart overflows for mercy with mercy for those that you are overlooking.

[11:00] Paul had to say the same thing to the Corinthians. He said in first Corinthians one, he says, consider your calling brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards.

Not many powerful, not many of noble birth, but God shows what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God shows what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

God shows what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not to bring to nothing the things that are so that no human being may boast in the presence of God.

And so what we see here is that the gospel contradicts all of our human wisdom and pride. God's grace cuts across all of our ways of calculating a person's worth, and it leaves us with nothing to boast about before God.

And in verse five, we see that God has taken the poor and he has made them rich in faith. He's made them rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom of God. And I think this point is really hard for us to grasp.

[12:07] I think it's really hard for us to grasp. God's perspective through this verse is that the poor are poor in the world's eyes, but they're actually rich in faith.

They actually have a grand inheritance in the kingdom of God. And so what God does is he actually turns our worldly perspective on its head. And this changes the way we relate to people.

Because if we're rich, there's a great temptation for us to read a passage like this and think, all right, I'm going to reach out to the poor person because I'm rich and they're poor and they have everything to receive from me.

And I have everything to give to them and they have everything to gain from my assistance. So what we end up doing is we can reach out to the poor or socially outcast with a sense of condescending charity.

We're the givers. They're the receivers. But verse five paints a completely different picture. Jesus, I mean, James encourages us to relate to the poor as those who are beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.

[13:14] Those whom God has given great gifts in the kingdom. Those whom God has exalted and loved and who have received much from him.

And so we're challenged to see ourselves actually on equal footing with the poor. They have been made rich.

And when that happens, then we start to see people the way that God wants us to see them. Then we start to realize that we relate to people, not just as those who are going to give, but as those who are going to receive.

Now we start to see that the poor person that walks into our midst is actually God's tremendous gift to the community. He's made them rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.

So listen, my beloved brothers and sisters, has God not chosen the poor in the world, which to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which is promised to those who love him.

[14:15] So that's God's glory and God's choice. Now God's law, the third side of the new frame, God's law. Look at verses nine and 10 and note the contrast.

If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. You are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and convicted by the law as transgressors.

And so what James does is he now takes us to the law and says, look, favoritism is actually breaking the law. And it's not just breaking any law.

It's breaking what the whole law is about, which is loving the Lord, our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, said the Lord Jesus, and then loving each other like ourselves.

Love your neighbor as yourselves. So what we see here is James wants us to see that showing favoritism is actually to refuse to love somebody. It's actually to withhold or reject our God-given responsibility toward our neighbor.

[15 : 27] And James finds this so important for us to understand, so serious that he takes four verses to drive this point home. Because he wants us to know that favoritism is not just some excusable weakness.

It is an offense to almighty God. And he wants us to know that it's not just some innocent mistake. It's a sin and transgression. Because how we treat people really matters.

How we treat those created in God's image really matters. So we must ask ourselves, are we refusing to love those whom God has called us to love?

Are we failing to love those whom Jesus came to love so deeply? Is there someone even in this gathering whom you are avoiding or ignoring or looking down upon or dishonoring?

Is there someone that you have favored to the exclusion of another? Brothers and sisters, has not the Lord of glory said you shall love your neighbor as yourself?

[16 : 34] So that's God's glory, God's choice, and God's law. And now, God's judgment. Last piece of the frame. Verses 12 and 13.

James gives a final exhortation. He says, So speak, and so act, as those who are judged, who are to be judged under the law of liberty. And then he gives us a reason for that exhortation.

Verse 13. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. And mercy triumphs over judgment. Now, judgment is not a fun thing to talk about.

It's not dinner table type conversation stuff, right? But these verses are absolutely clear. The reality is that every single one of us, no matter who you are, will appear before the great judgment seat of Christ one day, and you will have to give an account.

For everything that you've said, and everything that you have done. And God will make his judgment. And this judgment holds out a great warning to us, and a great encouragement.

[17 : 45] It holds out a great warning to those of us who do not live according to the law of liberty. Who have unmerciful hearts towards our neighbor. Who refuse to love. And it says to us that the judgment will be without mercy for the one who has shown no mercy.

It's a great warning. And there's a great hope. For the one who lives according to the law of liberty. Whose heart has been gripped by God's mercy so much that it has been freed to be merciful to the brother and sister in Christ.

To the neighbor. To the one whose heart has been so gripped by God's love that it has been freed to give itself in love to others. To that one, mercy will triumph over judgment.

And these verses are hard to swallow. They're really hard to swallow. But I think they serve to shock us out of our sin. And realize how important it is to God that we actually love each other.

And that we actually show mercy to those that we find it not easy to show mercy to. According to James, the genuineness of our faith is revealed precisely in how we relate to the poor that walk in our midst.

[19 : 02] So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.

And mercy triumphs over judgment. So that's the frame. God has reframed the way we see each other and relate to each other. But if you're anything like me, you get to the end of this passage and you feel like you have been smacked around.

The weightiness of what James said hits you hard and you wonder yourself, How in the world am I sufficient for these things? How in the world will I be able to obey these things?

And so I want to leave you with one suggestion by drawing you back to verse 1. My brothers and sisters, show no partiality. Listen to this. As you hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

The way we show no partiality, the way out of favoritism into the freedom of love and mercy, is not through white-knuckling it.

[20 : 16] It's not through pulling up our bootstraps. It's not through self-determination. It's through holding the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So I exhort you, cling to the faith.

Cling to the faith that though you are a great sinner, Christ is even a greater Savior. Cling to the faith that though you come to the Lord Jesus Christ in rags and filthiness and clothed in unrighteousness, the Lord Jesus Christ washes you in his blood that is flown from the cross and he clothes you with his righteousness.

Cling to the faith that though your heart is weak and your spirit unwilling to love the neighbor, that God has filled you with his holy and life-giving Holy Spirit, who will enable you and empower you to

walk in newness of life.

Cling to the faith that though you are unfaithful, God is faithful. And he who began a good work in you will complete it at the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so we throw ourselves back on that phrase at the end of our passage. Oh Lord, would mercy triumph over judgment. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[21 : 32] Amen. Amen.