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Sermon Notes

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Don't Show Favoritism!

James 2:1-13

In historic Congregational churches which date back to the colonial era in New England, you can frequently see BOXED PEWS with historic family names on plaques engraved on them. These represented a scandal in the colonial church in which wealthy families were able to rent the best seats in the church for generations... as long as they maintained their pew rents, they could actually bequeath these pews to their children as a form of inheritance. Reflecting the aristocratic society of colonial New England, these pews were given to the wealthiest and most powerful members of the community, whereas the poorer members of the church sat at the back of the church or on the floor or in balconies.

You can see this same kind of thing in Colonial Williamsburg, where there are plaques showing George Washington's pew or Thomas Jefferson's pew in the Bruton Parish church.

But these indications of social preferences given to the rich and powerful were much more on display in Europe...

One ancient document of ecclesiastical laws for the church of England had this statement:

"The parishioners have indeed a claim to be seated according to their rank and station, but the churchwardens are not, in providing for these, to overlook the claims of *all the parishioners to be seated*, if sittings can be afforded them."

So in other words, the people attending church in England should be seated according to their social rank, but the poorer people should be given seats IF POSSIBLE.

The problem of favoritism in churches is not a new one... it actually goes much further back than the Reformation in England... for this section of the book of James directly addresses the problem of FAVORITISM offered to the rich over the poor... and he levels it with many powerful arguments

The problem of favoritism in churches extends to the issue of DISCRIMINATION in churches as well... perhaps DISCRIMINATION might be a more potent synonym for FAVORITISM... in any case these thirteen verses in James 2 show a powerful destruction of these kinds of distinctions in the Body of Christ

I. Favoritism Forbidden in Christ's Church (vs. 1-4)

James 2:1 My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.

A. James Simply Forbids Favoritism

1. Verse 4 is a clear prohibition... DON'T DO IT... "Thou shalt not..."
2. To be a Christian, a believer in the Lord of Glory, Jesus Christ means that such worldly distinctions must be ruled out forever
3. The congregations of Christians must show the basic equality of all human beings before the Law of God and before the atoning Cross of Christ

B. What is "Favoritism?"

1. The word literally means "the lifting up of someone's face"...
2. Judging someone by the external of FACE... of wealth and social status

3. Other translations speak of being a “respector of persons” or “partiality”

C. James Gets Very Specific About the Kind of Favoritism He Means

James 2:2-4 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

1. It specifically has to do with the RICH...
2. The case study is of the church assembled for worship... the church is gathered to hear the word of God preached, to sing the praises of the Lord Jesus Christ
3. Two different men walk in for the service... perhaps they are believers, perhaps unbelievers... maybe they are members of the church, maybe not... James does not specify
4. But he does describe the difference between the two men:
 - a. One man has “a gold ring and fine clothes”... literally shining clothes, brilliant clothes, radiant clothes... like they are shimmering with light... he is CLEARLY WEALTHY
 - b. The other man is wearing poor shabby clothes... the Greek word implies that his clothes are filthy, perhaps even stinking; the KJV calls them “vile”
5. The key moment comes when you see how these two men are treated
 - a. IF you show special attention to the rich man and usher him to the prime seating section reserved for honored members... and treat him with overwhelming courtesy saying “Here’s an excellent seat for you!”
 - b. BUT THEN you shove the poor man off to the side or say even more insultingly “Sit on the floor by my feet”... he doesn’t

even get to sit on your footstool; he's got to sit on the floor...
utter disrespect

6. This is exactly what James is talking about... this is the favoritism he is attacking... this is the discrimination he is FORBIDDING
7. And it seems not to have been merely theoretical

James 2:6 But you have insulted the poor.

8. THIS MUST STOP!!

9. He then gives an array of reasons why... let's walk through them

II. Favoritism is Contrary to Christ... and to God (vs. 1)

James 2:1 My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.

A. James Calls Jesus Christ the LORD OF GLORY

1. He is Almighty God, the judge of all the earth
2. His ways must rule our churches

B. And Jesus Christ was ABSOLUTELY NO RESPECTER OF PERSONS

1. He had literally no fear of man at all
2. He treated everyone the same independent of their station in life
3. He dealt tenderly and clearly and respectfully with all repentant sinners, whether they were outcast leper beggars or rich young rulers; whether they were immoral prostitutes or members of the Jewish ruling council; whether they were Roman centurions or Samaritan women getting water from a well
4. Jesus was no respecter of faces, of stations, of power or prestige or money... none of that meant anything to him
5. He realized all of those trappings would be stripped from these human sinners on Judgment Day and he himself would be

evaluating all of them based on the Law of God and the mercy of the gospel

6. He was ordained to be the Judge of All the Earth

John 5:22-23 *the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.*

Matthew 25:31-33 *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

7. Christ's impartiality was so pronounced and clear that even his enemies knew it and tried to use it to get him in trouble with the question of taxation by the Romans:

Mark 12:14 *They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

C. This is Exactly How God Is

1. In this way, Jesus perfectly reflected the impartiality of God the Father
2. As James will make plain in verse 5, God's election goes completely contrary to worldly wisdom... God chooses the poor people overwhelmingly to believe in Christ... but we'll get to that!
3. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that God is no respecter of persons

Deuteronomy 10:17-18 *For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. ¹⁸ He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing.*

Psalm 62:9 Lowborn men are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie; if weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath.

Daniel 4:17 the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men

4. God does not show favoritism

Romans 2:9-11 There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; 10 but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 11 For God does not show favoritism.

Acts 10:34-35 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

Ephesians 6:9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

D. Jesus Christ perfectly followed his Father's complete indifference to the rank and station of the poor sinners he came to save... all of them have sinned, all of them will die and face his judgement, all of them need him to save them

E. Before the LAW of God, the ground is level... everyone has violated it

F. Before the Cross of Christ, the ground is level... everyone who repents and trusts in Christ will be saved

G. On Judgment Day, Money will make no difference whatsoever

Proverbs 11:4 Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.

H. This is the Character of God... and of His Son, the Lord of Glory... Jesus Christ... and it SHOULD BE THE CHARACTER of Christ's church!

III. Favoritism Reveals an Evil Heart (vs. 4)

James 2:3-4 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

A. Showing Favoritism Reflects an Evil Heart

B. Specifically... we would say a WORLDLY Heart...

1. The reason you are showing favoritism to the rich man, but shoving the poor man off to the side or onto the floor is simply this: the rich man can do things for you that the poor man cannot
2. The rich man can buy things... the rich man can support your church budget or build you a lavish building to worship in; the rich man has influence in court or friends in high places; the rich man can get you a job or donate to your mission trip
3. BUT the poor man can do NONE of those things; in fact, the poor man is probably a liability... he will need your resources—your time, your energy, and especially your money

C. But All of this is evidence of WORLDINESS

1. Seeing the things that money can buy of more significance than the value of a human soul
2. James will expose this worldliness later in his epistle

James 4:3-4 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. 4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

D. So Also Christian Churches Today... Seek Finances and Worldly Influence from the Rich and Famous

1. We get more excited when the starting Quarterback at the Division 1 school becomes a Christian than when the equipment manager or

the janitor does... WHY? Because of the “influence” he could have

2. We get more excited when Kanye West becomes a Christian than a man who comes to the Durham Rescue Mission knowing that he’s ruined his life with alcohol, and he prays to receive Christ
3. This mentality is evidence of a WORLDLY way of thinking

Zechariah 4:6 "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.

IV. Favoritism Ignores God’s Election (vs. 5)

James 2:5 Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

A. God Delights in Choosing the Poor

1. Paul makes this point powerfully and abundantly in 1 Corinthians 1
2. The Corinthian Christians were enamored with great men... the great philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates... then they transferred that to Christian leaders... Paul, Apollos, Peter
3. They were also in love with human wisdom and power and wealth
4. Paul shows how God levels all that

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him.

When God chose his people before the foundation of the world, he purposely went after the lowliest and most despised people in every society... the “down and outers”

So to show favoritism to the rich and powerful on Sunday mornings
 MAKES NO SENSE AT ALL! Certainly a rich man should be
 welcomed and made to feel completely at home at the worship
 service... but no more than a poor man or a middle class
 merchant or artisan

B. “Rich in Faith”

1. James says that God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of
 the world to be RICH IN FAITH
2. What a great image... their poverty enables them not to trust in
 wealth but in God; their daily scarcity makes them come back to
 God again and again in prayer

Think of the poor widow in Zarephath who Elijah fed day after day
 by the jars of flour and oil never running out, but providing
 only enough for that day. She was MIGHTY IN FAITH by the
 end of that process

3. More than that... simple faith in Christ is the great COMMODITY
 of this world on Judgment Day
 - a. Wealthy people trade stocks and bonds and gold and oil and
 other material commodities
 - b. But the only commodity that Christ will welcome on Judgment
 Day is FAITH IN CHRIST...

***1 John 5:4 everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory
 that has overcome the world, even our faith.***

C. So... favoritism ignores God’s election of poor people all over the
 world as Christians

1. From the poorest of the poor in Cameroon and Haiti and
 Bangladesh
2. To the “dalit” (“untouchables” in India... the lowest class in their
 caste system)
3. To the “Burakumin” of Japan... the lowest in their caste system

4. To the black slaves in antebellum South
5. God has again and again worked faith and salvation in their hearts by his sovereign grace

V. Favoritism Forgets the Oppression by the Rich (vs. 6-7)

James 2:6-7 But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

- A. Later James will address rich oppressors very plainly

James 5:1-6 Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. 2 Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. 3 Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. 4 Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. 5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

- B. The Overwhelming Majority of Rich People Are Unconverted

Matthew 19:23-24 Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

- C. Powerful Rich People Run the System

Luke 16:8 the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

- D. The Opposition of Rich People Here

1. "Exploiting you"... rich people can jury-rig the system to take advantage of the poor... they can bribe judges, get certain people established in positions of power

2. “Dragging you into court”... then they can force you into court where you will lose; no advocate will speak for you, the bribed judge will throw the book at you; the judicial system will enforce the unjust ruling against you
3. “Blaspheming the noble name” of Christ: their god is their stomach, and Satan is behind their power; so they have no respect for Christ and actually blaspheme him; like the silversmith Demetrius who started a riot in Ephesus because Paul and Christians were causing him to lose business in selling silver replicas of the shrine of Artemis, so also in every generation, unscrupulous wealthy people have hated Christ and Christians and secretly moved powerfully against the name of Christ

E. SO... Why Insult the Poor to Favor Such Rich Oppressors?!

VI. Favoritism Violates the Law of Love (vs. 8-13)

James 2:8-9 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

A. James’s Final Point Has to Do With the Law

1. He calls it the “royal law of Scripture”: “love your neighbor as yourself”
2. It is what Jesus called the “second great commandment”
3. Paul said it summed up the entire Law of Moses (as it pertains to other people)

Romans 13:9-10 The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

4. Favoritism violates the law “love your neighbor as yourself”
 - a. The command should not be twisted to say “you have to love yourself first before you can love other people”

b. NOT AT ALL! We already DO love ourselves every moment of every day... we feed and clothe and care for ourselves diligently; if our body is in pain, we care for it

c. In like manner, if you were walking into a new place of worship where you knew no one, how would you want to be treated?

5. To keep this royal law of scripture is to DO WELL!

B. BUT Favoritism Breaks the Law of God

1. Favoritism based on wealth and social status violates that ROYAL LAW! If you were that poor person, you would not want to be treated so shamefully as “sit on the floor by my feet”

2. To strip a person of their dignity based on wealth is shameful and degrading

3. Now if you come in late to the service, and there are no seats left, a member of the congregation might rise and offer you his seat; if this is done to a poor person just because he is HUMAN, that actually ennobles all the people there

4. But the opposite—favoritism—clearly violates the Law of God

C. Violation of One Part of the Law is a Violation of ALL of It

James 2:10-11 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 11 For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

1. This is a vital aspect of our witnessing

2. Most people keep some aspects of the Law of God... most of us have never physically murdered someone; many of us have never physically committed adultery; but everyone has broken some aspect of the Law of God... like “you shall not covet”

3. The WHOLE LAW came from the mind of God, and God demands ALL of it

4. This destroys the most common WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS philosophies in the world... all of them are based on God “grading on the curve” and seeing if our good works generally have outweighed the bad
5. But the same God commands ALL OF THEM ALL THE TIME
6. Therefore the atoning work of Christ is essential to our salvation

2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Romans 3:23-24 all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

D. Saved by Mercy to Show Mercy to Others

James 2:12-13 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

1. James is saying that the Law of God gives true freedom... freedom from wickedness... in this case, the wickedness of favoritism based on money and power
2. The Golden Rule—“Do to others as you would have them do to you” SETS US FREE from all manner of sins
3. When the Law has brought us to Christ, the Holy Spirit brings us back to the Law, and that law commands that we show MERCY to other sinners
4. Judgment without mercy will be meted out on Judgment Day for those who have lived merciless lives here on earth
5. “Mercy triumphs over judgment” for us on Judgment Day... if during our lives we showed mercy to others
6. This reminds all of us of the “Sheep and the Goats”

Matthew 25:31-46 *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' 40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' 41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' 44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' 45 "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' 46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

VII. Applications

A. Let the Law Convict You of Sin and Bring you to Christ

1. Even if you have never actually physically committed murder or adultery, Jesus will look at the heart
2. If you have been angry in your heart toward another person, you have essentially murdered that person in your heart

3. If you have looked lustfully at a person, you have committed adultery in your heart
4. God said “you shall not covet”... deeply desire something that is not yours... and we all do that
5. The Law exposes our sins and drives us to the cross

B. See All People—Rich and Poor Alike—in Light of Eternity

1. Don’t see a rich person only in terms of his money, and what material things he can buy you or give you... that rich man or woman has an eternal soul that will spend eternity either in heaven or hell
2. Don’t see a poor person only in terms of his neediness... he or she also has an eternal soul that will spend eternity either in heaven or hell
3. Treat people with the dignity all human beings should receive as created in the image of God

C. See FAITH as the True Wealth

1. Poor people are “rich in faith” in the election of God
2. Seek to be truly rich in faith... seeing the invisible spiritual realities of this world properly

D. Let the Word of God Move us to Mercy Ministries

1. One of the most powerful platforms for the gospel is meeting felt needs
2. Many believers have sacrificially ministered to the poor and needy and found amazing fruit in sharing the gospel with them

Christ clearly gave priority to ministering to those who could never repay us here on earth...

Luke 14:12-14 Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will

be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

When a devastating smallpox plague swept across the ancient world in 251 AD, Christians were the only ones who cared for the sick, which they did at the risk of contracting the plague themselves.

BY CONTRAST, the Pagans were running for their lives:

Pagan Historian Thucydides: "People died with no one to look after them; indeed there were many houses in which all the inhabitants perished through lack of any attention. The bodies of the dying were heaped on top of the others who had already died... and half-dead people were staggering through the streets or flocking around the fountains in their desperate desire for water. The temples in which the dying took up their quarters were already full of the dead bodies of those who had died inside them."

Most of the best pagan doctors had fled Rome to Asia Minor until the plague was over!

The Christians acted completely differently! Instead of fleeing for their lives, they cared for their brothers and sisters in Christ. But even more shockingly, they extended their care to include the pagans who were dying around them when their family and friends had abandoned them!

These Christians were living out Christ's plain teaching:

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

Imagine the impact on you as a dying pagan when the only healthy people around you are Christians who are preaching the gospel... a gospel of freedom from fear of death... people who were living an otherworldly life, when paganism was completely exposed as the fraud it was