

## Sermon: Playing Favorites

Have you ever needed to make a decision, and you just couldn't decide? You'd looked at all the options, and there didn't seem to be one right answer, one perfect solution. You just had to use your best judgment, so you could go forward.

We make judgments all the time. We make choices based on the best information we can gather. Sometimes those choices are good ones, and sometimes we make poor choices. Either way, every choice we make is a judgment call. But there's a difference between judging and being judgmental.

Judgment holds our decisions accountable to a standard, often one we didn't create. For Christians, that standard is the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. But when we get judgmental, we compare ourselves to other people, and the standard we often use is our own ego.

When we get judgmental, we might decide that we are better than someone else. Of course, we don't put it like that. Instead, we focus on what's wrong with the other person, and the mistakes they've made.

It's easy to look down on someone who doesn't measure up to our standard – but it might be difficult for us to see that the standard we are using is our own view of ourselves.

Sometimes our judgement tells us that other people are better than we are, too. We see them as more successful, more intelligent, more lovable than we are. It works both ways. Whether we think we are superior to someone else, or somehow inferior, the problem is that we are being judgmental.

That affects the way we treat people. And it can lead us into sin.

When James asks, "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" it sounds as if he is challenging the sincerity of our faith in Jesus! Can you really call yourselves Christians if you show favoritism to one person and disdain to another?

Some translations turn this question into a statement. They read: "Hold the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without acts of favoritism."

Hold the faith. That puts a little different slant on verse one. Instead of asking us if we are really Christians, James encourages us to show our faith by the way we treat people with fairness and impartiality.

But whether you think of it as a challenging question or an encouraging statement, one thing is clear: favoritism within the church is a sin.

And it seems that the early church had just as much trouble as we do when it comes to ignoring the poor in order to show favor to the rich.

Imagine that you are helping to greet people one Sunday, when a guest comes through the door dressed in expensive clothes, wearing elegant jewelry, and walking with an air of importance. Right behind this person is another guest, wearing dirty clothes that are torn, carrying a backpack that has seen better days, and smelling like it's been a while since this person has taken a shower.

Are you going to welcome them the same way? You probably will, because here at St. Andrew's Stirling, we are all polite and loving people.

And what assumptions have we already made about these two guests, based on their appearance? What assumptions might you have about the amount they will put into the offering plate as they leave the sanctuary, or the likelihood they might want to join in serving through a particular ministry of our church?

James says we shouldn't make any distinctions, because showing partiality to one person or another divides the community. Playing favorites tears apart the Body of Christ, and damages our witness to the world. Besides, when we show favor to the rich at the expense of the poor, we go against everything Jesus taught.

Throughout scripture, we find over and over again that God honors the oppressed, not the oppressors. God cares about the poor. God has always cared about the poor. And there is something in this passage from James

that we might not fully understand, reading from the perspective of our 21<sup>st</sup> century middle class comfort. The people to whom James was writing were most likely poor themselves.

James reminds them of “their own painful experience at the hands of the wealthy. In their own treatment of the poor, James’s readers are endorsing the domination system of the powerful and rich. Their partiality for wealth sets them at odds with the essence of faith.

We run the same risk today, of allowing oppression generated by secular social structures to dictate our moral values. We don’t like to think about the ways our treatment of the poor keeps them dependent on our generosity or the work of government.

We don’t like to think about making a deeper commitment to help them learn new skills and habits that will break the cycle of poverty, because we would rather give handouts than invest our time and energy in building relationships.

James is warning us, as much as he was warning his first century audience. Instead of following the world’s value system, a system that often makes the rich richer and the poor poorer, James reminds us of the ‘royal law’ that goes back to Leviticus. Love your neighbor as yourself.

This is the central idea of Jesus’ teaching. Love God first, and love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two primary rules for life. To love our neighbors, we have to spend time with them, get to know them, live in close proximity to them.

This brings us to another place where we can stumble into sin. Loving our neighbor isn’t always difficult; sometimes it’s loving ourselves that catches us up short. We don’t want to be labeled as proud or self-centered. We don’t want to be accused of thinking too highly of ourselves.

In his letter to the church at Rome, the Apostle Paul writes, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned”.

So, we are careful to practice a kind of humility that isn't actually humble at all. It has been said, "According to Scripture, the opposite of humility is not pride but selfishness. And therein lies the problem with our definitions. They are all self-referential. We can't even talk about humility without somehow referencing the self. Here's what I'm slowly learning. Humility is not about self at all. Humility is all about others. Humility is not putting yourself down. That's false humility. Humility is about lifting others up."

And that brings us back to the 'royal law,' to love others as we love ourselves. It isn't about us at all. It's about loving others; the ones in fine clothes, and the ones in smelly rags. No favorites – all favored.

Because when we do that, mercy triumphs over judgment. Love wins over pride. Caring brings us to mutual freedom. When we favor each person we meet, and recognize each person as someone God loves so deeply, he'd become a human just to die for that one soul, we become part of something beyond ourselves. We become part of the Kingdom of God that Jesus came to introduce.

Showing God's favor to each person we meet does something else, too. It builds our faith into a faith that really works. As our faith grows stronger, and our love for God grows deeper, we will find that favoring one person over another makes no sense anymore. God has showered his favor on us so we can share it with all: rich and poor, young and old, powerful and powerless. God has no favorites, for each of us is God's own beloved child.

Amen