



## 4. The Peril of Partiality (James 2:1-13)

As many of you know, when it comes to sport, I'm strictly only prepared to be a spectator. I was one of those people who simply hated sport at school and I have to say to my shame, that it's the only thing I ever used to bunk off. I can remember recycling the same sick note from my mother for a whole term to get out of swimming. When I broke one of my fingers it was manna from heaven. My fingers were bound up weeks after the doctors gave me the green light.

What was so wrong with sport in school? As in most schools, the school bullies were always good at sport. The more violent the sport, the more they despised anybody who did not like it. So when we played football, I was always the last one to be picked and always got to be goalie. Why is it that they always put the worst player as goalie? Everybody that was not sporting was an insignificant wimp! So those that hated sport got to be bullied and to be a useless goalkeeper.

Why do I tell you all about my sad schooldays? It's because from an early age we are trained in the sin of *partiality*. What is partiality? Let me give you a definition.

**Partiality** - the showing of bias towards certain people or parties. In life, we quickly learn who we like and who we don't. The word Paul uses for partiality here is *prosopolepsia*. Sounds like a disease doesn't it? In a sense it is. It is showing bias and favouritism to someone or a group of people at the expense of others who suffer inferiority or hurt. In other words, being partial means favouring somebody and consequently discriminating against someone else. It's a coin with two sides. Do one and you do the other. Partiality is usually based on outward appearances rather than a person's personal merits. A feature of partiality is its divisiveness and destructiveness of relationships.

You will remember from our last look into James that he says this: *Jam 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.* You can understand what the undefiled bit is all about, but what about the widows and orphans? It was obvious in one sense why they should, but as we shall see in chapter 2, the people James was writing to showed partiality to those who were rich. As a result the poor were actively discriminated against – and probably in an unconscious way.

Let's not confuse partiality with legitimate ways in which we favour some people. In a church we provide facilities for the disabled. We provide activities for children, youth, women and soon, families. That's not partiality as the purpose is to help and encourage them in their lives as part of the church. They are attempts to make the fellowship more inclusive. Partiality brings the opposite – it brings division – and makes church fellowships more exclusive by pushing certain people away.

We mustn't confuse partiality with boundaries either. Scripture sets clear boundaries as to how believers are to behave. For example, we have an open communion table – all who know and trust Jesus as their Saviour and Lord are invited to take the bread and wine. This is the invitation of Jesus. But there is a boundary. If you don't know Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, then it isn't open to you. Why? Not because we discriminate against you. It's just that Jesus gave this to believers and it can only have meaning for them. It's a boundary set by Him, not to exclude people but include all believers and act as an invitation to unbelievers to come and accept Christ and be included in the people of God.

We want an inclusive fellowship here so James is well worth listening to because as human beings, influenced by a godless world, we have a tendency to easily slip into partiality as we shall discover.

Partiality usually comes from the way we pigeonhole and stereotype people. This will help us when we come to see if we are as partial as the recipients of this letter. We are not just partial to certain people, but to certain types of people. We are partial to our own sort. And we make sweeping

statements about people we don't like - don't we?

"All youths are troublemakers" so we create Exclusion Orders to stop them hanging round the streets in groups of two or more. Good riddance to them most people say – but what about those youths who have never been any problem, who are law abiding, don't steal, don't mug, respect their elders that moved on by the Police, who get taken home or arrested just because they met someone they knew in the street who they wanted to stop and talk to. If any of us were arrested, we would be deeply upset that someone was depriving us of a liberty. So why should decent kids be penalized because of the activities of some? Stereotyping is part of being partial and it can lead to discrimination and worse. Sadly, in society we find if a minority do it, the majority suffer.

Here's another one. Why should every Christian person and group be branded as inciting religious hatred because we say that Jesus is the only way to God, just because some evil Muslim clerics are inciting young men to blow themselves up and take innocent people with them? Just because one religious group is capable of propagating that kind of evil does not mean we are all into it – quite the reverse in the case of our faith. It's one of the worst cases of stereotyping in our society and if the Religious Hatred Bill goes through, could lead to the most awful injustices if the Australian experience is anything to go by.

Partiality leads to discrimination and hurt and James makes it quite clear that it's wrong: **9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.** If you haven't already realised it, what's so wrong? I mentioned last week that as God's people we are called to be people who act with mercy, righteousness and justice. God loves these things and comes down heavily on those who do not show them such as the bit in Amos I mentioned last week where God allowed Israel to go into captivity for their running from Him and the injustice that they showed within their society. To fail to show mercy, love and justice is something God regards as serious. Very serious. Here are two verses to help us.

***Psa 33:5 He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. Mic 6:8 He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?***

The sin of the people James was writing to is that they fawned over the rich people and neglected the poor. Why? I guess because their tithes and offerings would boost the coffers well. Rich noble people were respected and therefore were given places of honour in meeting of the church.

What of the poor? They were ignored, denigrated and not cared about. And everyone thought that was OK. They didn't see the injustice in it. If you are rich you are worthy of honour, if you are poor – no. The way of the world; yes – the way of the church; no. Yet the irony was that those people who so often demanded – and got – respect from Christians were also responsible for injustice to them. No only was it a bad double standard; it made no sense either!

Does that happen today? In society it does. It is surprising how much respect crooks in power get. On a petty level, even in our more egalitarian modern society, respect for those who are someone is something we think nothing of. When I got my Ph.D and used the title Dr, I found that to my amazement, people in certain circumstances treated me differently.

Here's a true story for you. In the BWA I was hanging around minding my own business when someone came up to me and said "Are you one of the staff?" I said "no". "That's a shame" he replied, "I thought from the badge that you were important".

At the beginning of the last century, a celebrated opera singer called Pierre Monteau called in at a New York hotel to inquire if they had a room. The concierge told him that the hotel was full. Just as Monteau was leaving, someone recognized him and told the concierge who informed him that they could find him a room after all. "I'm sorry, Mr Monteau" the concierge said "we didn't realize you were somebody. Monteau replied "My dear chap, everybody is somebody"

It's so natural to do it. Because there are some natural divisions in life, many of which are legitimate and even God-given – we think that it's OK to divide and exclude. You may even be surprised how emphatically James says it's a sin.

But we understand from Scripture that God shown no partiality! To God everybody is the same – *For all have sinned and come short of God's glory (Rom 3:23)*. But in Christ, God has made each of us somebody in His kingdom. I remember a young man in London sharing about his faith. He was black and often faced abuse by others as he walked along the street. He said to his black Christian friends “Just remember, when you walk along the street and hold you heads high – you are the children of the Living God. You’re important to Him; you’re special.”

God is not partial. Let’s have a look at a few scriptures:

*Deu 10:17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.*

*2Ch 19:7 Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes.”*

*Job 34:19 who shows no partiality to princes, nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands?*

*Act 10:34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,*

It’s obvious and we all know it. God is no respecter of persons. He’s not partial. R T Kendall says that somehow through our human traditions we become immune to the plain truths of scripture<sup>1</sup>. And that’s us too. And James encourages us right from the first verse , *show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory*. A better translation of this would probably be *don’ t hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory with partiality*It’s not just the faith in, but the faith of. In other words, it’s not about our faith but about the character of Christ. We are called to be like Jesus – and in His character there was no partiality and that remains so as He offers Himself freely to all those who would come to Him. So we should have no partiality in our characters either.

We know this – but as RT says, we somehow just can’t help being partial. It’s so easy isn’t it? Somebody in the church is not like us and it’s easy to exclude them and make them feel excluded. I was brought up in a church full of cliques. People were excluded because they were made to feel not loved or wanted. We’re fortunate here, we don’t really have that problem here. But it’s easy to slip into that way of thinking. “Don’t bother with so-and-so – they don’t care”. Or worse, we look down on someone who we don’t think they are spiritual enough. Another divide is where Christians find they have different gifts to others and either feel excluded or are excluded because others are more “spiritual” than them.

We kind of make excuses for it but the message is simple – partiality is not of God, it’s wrong and it’s sin and as James reminds us - *9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.*

Just a minute I hear you say. We’re not under law. Not the Jewish law certainly. We have been freed from the law of sin and death and all it’s consequences – but as we’ve passed into God’s kingdom and become free – we live as free men and women but under God’s house rules. James refers to it as - *12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.*

What’s the law of liberty. To James it is the same thing as Paul and John. They are summed up in v8 - *8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well.*

They are the words of Deuteronomy, but most importantly, they are the words of Jesus. They embrace all the law and the prophets. Keep these and you don’t need the rest as they will determine all your actions; anytime anywhere. Law for the Christian is simple. Love God and love your neighbour as you love yourself. Your live for that person you don’t think much of, for those people you stereo-

---

<sup>1</sup> R T Kendall, *Justification by Works*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 2001, p138.

type should be 100% commitment to die for them in the way that Jesus died for you. To show partiality to the few and not to all is partiality and unjust. Therefore James says

***13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.***

I mentioned before, partiality is a form of injustice and we have a God who is merciful and loves justice. So when we see the person we don't agree with, or annoys us, or who has different gifts from us, who's a different background or who is poorer or richer than us – let's not show partiality, but let's show mercy and receive the mercy of God.

maybe this morning you realize that there is someone in this fellowship that you have ignored, thought badly of, avoided, criticized just because you don't like them or like their sort. It's time to come before God in repentance and seek their forgiveness too. As we come around the table this morning, we see the product of a God who has showed us mercy, love and justice in offering us forgiveness freely through the blood of Christ. Let's find that forgiveness afresh this morning.



© Mark Reid 2005  
Preached at Swaffham Baptist Church 21/6/2005  
Scripture Quotes ESV