

“No Little People or Sins”
James 2:1-13
July 16, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

James devotes a surprisingly large amount of attention to the sin of partiality. We could define this sin as treating people differently according to their outward appearance or worldly advantages. James specifically mentions the poor as those who come out on the short end of the sin of partiality. They are the invisible ones who are seen but not really seen. The rich, on the other hand, are catered to, even fawned over, and treated with deference for no reason other than their riches. The poor are marginalized for no reason other than their poverty.

Though James specifically mentions those who are materially poor as the ones who suffer from the sin of partiality, I believe we could rightly expand this to other groups. It could also include the elderly, those intellectually or socially challenged, or even the overweight. There are many categories of people who are written off, discounted and marginalized because they lack a certain appearance or advantage. That is the sin of partiality.

Both sociological studies and the Bible report that such partiality is quite common. I remember reading several years ago of a study that was done about hiring practices. It was clear that preferences for hiring were given to attractive people. It was as if the attractive had to prove they could not do a job, while the unattractive had to prove they could. The Bible says the same thing. When Samuel was anointing the king of Israel who would rule after Saul, he had to be reminded by God, **“Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart”** (1 Sam. 16:7). Apparently, Israel’s great King David was on the unattractive side, at least in comparison to his brothers. And the prophet Isaiah said of the Son of David who is the King of kings, **“He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him”** (Is. 53:2). So those who show partiality are also likely to overlook Jesus and esteem him lightly. James seeks to counter this common sin by making the powerful point here that there are no little sins, just as there are no little people.

I. No Little People – v. 1-7

Though it may seem a little curious at first that James devotes such a large portion of his letter to this sin of partiality, we learn immediately in verse 1 why he does so. He sees the sin of partiality as being incompatible with faith in Christ. **“My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord**

Jesus Christ.” He then gives a vivid example of partiality. Two visitors come into a worship service. We know they are visitors because they aren’t sure where to sit, and everybody knows that regulars know exactly where they are going to sit—the same place they sat last week. But there is a difference between these two visitors. One is obviously a man of wealth while the other is clearly a poor man. The ushers immediately recognize the potential of the rich man to help their struggling church. A tithe from such a man might very well equal the current budget of the church. So they quickly step in to offer to help him find a seat and give him a prime spot. What about the poor man? It’s not that they are openly rude to him. He is allowed in and given a seat as well. But it is clear that he is not given any esteem. He quickly becomes invisible, as opposed to what likely happened to the rich man. We can easily imagine stolen glances in his direction, wondering how he was reacting to the various parts of the service. There is nothing wrong with showing esteem to those we meet. The sin is in doing so based on outward appearance and social standing.

James lays out three reasons why this sin is wrong. First, as we have already mentioned, partiality is incompatible with faith in Jesus. It is essentially trusting in those with power and influence rather than in Jesus. It is also incompatible with faith in Jesus because it fails to recognize what Jesus is all about. Jesus is creating a new community of people where, as the apostle Paul says, **“there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** (Gal. 3:28). The distinctions made in our sinful world that lead us to think of some as superior to others have no place in the community Jesus is creating. The failure to do so is to be guilty of becoming **“judges with evil thoughts.”** So when we give more esteem to some because they happen to be rich, or good-looking, or highly educated or influential, we are violating what Jesus is doing with his Church. There are no little people in Jesus’ Church.

Remember the makeup of Jesus’ twelve disciples. It was an assembly that never would have come together as a cohesive group apart from Jesus. To use our political categories, one would have been a right-wing conservative, Simon the Zealot, while another, the tax-collector Matthew, would have been seen as part of the establishment. They were definitely on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Most of them were poor, but some would have had more than others. Perhaps Matthew, being a tax-collector, would have been considered rich. We see this pattern continue in the book of Acts. In his theological commentary on the book of Acts, Willie James Jennings points out that “The deepest reality of life in the Spirit depicted in the book of Acts is that the disciples of Jesus rarely, if ever, go where they want to go or to whom they would want to go. Indeed the Spirit seems to always be pressing the disciples to go to those to whom they would in fact strongly prefer never to share space, or a meal, and definitely not life together” (Acts, p. 11). For example, Peter at first refused the eating of unclean food, which would have prevented him eating with the Gentile, Cornelius. Ananias didn’t want to go to Paul. The early

disciples did not want to leave Jerusalem to go throughout the world with the gospel, and only did so when persecution gave them no choice.

It is the same with us, isn't it? God's Spirit is always pushing us to cross boundaries and reach out to those who might be a little different from us, and we resist, showing partiality to those who are like us, those with whom we feel more comfortable. We don't like it when our small groups have to divide to accommodate more people. We don't like new people coming to our church, especially if they are different from us. But Jesus is Lord of this Church, and he has a vision for the kind of community he wants to create.

This brings us to the second reason James offers for why the sin of partiality is wrong. It makes us enemies of Jesus, because Jesus prefers the very ones who come out on the short end of our favoritism. James says it like this. **“Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?”** (v. 5). James doesn't mean that riches are sinful and poverty is virtuous. He is simply reflecting what Paul told the Corinthians, that **“not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth”** (1 Cor. 1:26). He doesn't say none of them were wise, powerful, and of noble birth. But there is something about power and riches that leads away from faith in God and toward trust in oneself. And there is something about poverty that leads us toward God because we know our resources are inadequate. It's not that all poor come to faith and that no wealthy come to faith, but merely that tendencies exist within poverty and riches that result in more poor than rich coming into the church. So to show partiality against the poor is to put oneself on the opposite side of what Jesus is doing.

In a sermon he preached on this passage, Kent Hughes tells of a woman who lived in the poor part of town but who wanted to join a fashionable church on the rich part of town. When she told the pastor of her desire to join, he recommended that she go home and think about it carefully for a week. At the end of the week, she returned and said that she still wanted to join. The pastor replied, “Now, let's not be hasty. Go home and read your Bible for an hour every day this week. Then come back and tell me if you feel you should join.” She agreed and came back the next week and said that she still thought she should join the church. The pastor, still reluctant, said, “I have one more suggestion. You pray every day this week and ask the Lord if he wants you to come into our fellowship.” She didn't come back the next week, and the pastor didn't see her until six months later, when he just happened to run into her on the street and asked her what she had decided about church membership. She said, “I did what you asked me to do. I went home and prayed. One day while I was praying, the Lord said to me, ‘Don't worry about not getting into that church. I've been trying to get into it myself for the last twenty years!’”

When we show favoritism against the poor, not only do we make the Lord our enemy, but we also make friends of those who are actually our enemies. That's James' point in verse 6, and the third reason partiality is wrong. He points out how it is the rich who are oppressing them. They are favoring, as a class, the very ones who are hurting them.

II. No Little Sins – v. 8-13

Just as there are no little people in the Church, so there are no little sins as well. James felt the need to emphasize this because partiality could easily be classified as a little sin. Most of us classify sin like we do surgery. Perhaps you've heard of the definition of major surgery as being any surgery done on me. Likewise, many define big sins as any sin which others commit and little sins as the ones I commit. And since probably all of us have been guilty of this sin of partiality, it must be a little sin. James will not let us off the hook so easily. He says that this is a big sin for three reasons.

It is a big sin because it is a sin against the royal law of love. Why does James call this law to love your neighbor as yourself the royal law? I think there are several reasons. First, royal means that it belongs to a king, and this law was emphasized by King Jesus during his earthly ministry. He wants the law of love to be preeminent among his new community, just as it is within the trinity. Second, it is intended by God to have a weighty and prominent place. That's what happens with kings. A king is impossible to ignore, and so it should be with the law of love. There is a sense in which everything that happens within a church should be pushed through the filter of love. "Is this loving?" should be a common question we ask ourselves. As a church, we have put this in our mission statement. Do you know what our church's mission statement is? It is "loving God and others as we are transformed by his love."

If we show favoritism, we are violating this royal law of love. We violate it in that the opposite of love is selfishness, and favoritism is selfish at its roots. It favors those who one judges can bring some benefit to me. And it violates love too in that it is not loving to the rich or anyone so favored in this sin. Rich people don't need others deferring to them. They may want that, but what they need is others telling them the truth.

The second reason partiality is not a little sin is the fact that it is a transgression of God's law, and to violate one law is to be guilty of violating them all for the simple reason that they all have the same author. The law of God is like a chain in that breaking one part of it breaks the whole thing. James closes off to us one of our common escape routes when it comes to avoiding conviction of sin. We attempt to escape by focusing on the parts of the law where we consider ourselves least guilty, and then saying, "At least I

haven't done that." But James says you have broken that law in the sense that breaking one part of it renders you guilty of it all.

The third reason there are no little sins is that all sin brings us under the judgment of God. James says, **"So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy"** (2:12-13). Partiality is to deny mercy to a certain group of people, and God says that he will not let that go unpunished. He will behave toward us as we have behaved toward others and show no mercy. But this brings up a problem. Haven't we all been guilty of favoritism? I certainly have. What about God's mercy? Does God ask us to show mercy without doing so himself? No, God does show mercy toward us lawbreakers, and James speaks of that in the last part of verse 13. **"Mercy triumphs over judgment."** What does that mean? The language indicates that there is some kind of conflict between mercy and judgment. Sin must lead to judgment. No matter what the sin, no matter how small the sinner might consider the sin to be, judgment is required. Sin pleads for judgment, as it were. But mercy makes another plea, one for forgiveness and salvation. Who is going to win? "Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Let me get at this in another way. Whenever God's law is broken, what has been broken is what James calls for the second time in his letter "the law of liberty" (1:25; 2:12). I read this week someone who said that the most powerful people in the universe are the storytellers. What he meant is that those who can define the story have the power to shape and direct lives. For example, Satan told a story to Adam and Eve about the wonderful life that would be theirs if they would cast off the authority of God's law. Tragically, his story was false and their life became the opposite of wonderful. There are many storytellers in our culture who are repeating Satan's story, and they are powerful people. Have you heard their voices? Don't believe them.

The Bible tells a different story, indicated by this phrase "the law of liberty." This is the true story, and it is our story as God's people. You have been created for freedom, and God has lovingly given his law to direct us into the full realization of our freedom. But we have not believed God and thought freedom would come by doing what we wanted. That path leads only to judgment. But judgment doesn't get the last word. Mercy does. In his mercy, God gave to Jesus the judgment of a lawbreaker, though he was innocent of any lawbreaking. And he gives to us the reward of lawkeepers, the reward earned by Jesus. It is in this way that mercy triumphs over judgment. The next part of the story is that if you believe this, it will inevitably work itself out in showing mercy to others.