

As we continue our study of the New Testament letter written by James, we come to a topic we hear a lot about. It's the topic of discrimination. Most of us know what discrimination is: It's the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the basis of race, age, gender, or class. This is a huge issue in our society. Lots of people are talking about it and trying to fight against it through legislation and raising awareness along with other means.

And one of the places that we'd least expect to see discrimination is in the church. The Bible says the church is much like the human body, so much so, we call it "the body of Christ." In a body, though they may be different, each member is crucial to the proper functioning of the whole. So every person in every church is to be seen and treated as valuable, needed, and equal in worth and dignity. Someone once said, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross," and that should be as true in the church as it is anywhere. I'm sure most, if not all of you would agree with that. But what if I told you that wasn't always true? What if I told you the early church, the one led by Peter, Paul, John, and James, was rife with discrimination?

Does that surprise you? Every once in a while, I'll get in a conversation with someone about the church, not just this church but the church in general. Maybe they're looking for a church, and so I ask, "What kind of church are you looking for?" They tell me everything they want. Then I say: "It sounds like you're looking for the perfect church. Here's my advice, when you find that church, don't join it. You'll ruin it." You see, wherever there are people in a church, there will be problems. The early church, along with today's church, was not and never will be a perfect church. They had to do deal with this problem, and so do we at times. Hopefully, we'll be a church that deals with these things and tries to get better, but as long as we have people, we'll have these kinds of problems.

Discrimination doesn't belong in the church

James confronts this issue of discrimination head-on.

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. James 2:1

Notice a few things about this. Notice he's addressing believers. That's why he calls them "brothers and sisters." Notice also he calls them "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." Jesus is the glorious one. That alone should show us the foolishness

of placing one person above another. Before this glorious one, we're all on the same level! Notice this is a command, which means to show favoritism is a sin. It's simply incongruent to be a Christian and to discriminate.

We should ask, what exactly does James mean by favoritism? The word James uses literally means, "to receive someone according to their face." The idea is not to judge and treat people based on external factors like appearance, wealth, and social status. And by the way, this ethic was nothing new. Way back in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, God said, "*Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly*" (Leviticus 19:15).

And when it comes to this topic of favoritism or discrimination, followers of Jesus should actually be more progressive than the world is. In fact, if you know anything about world history, you know it's Christians who've been at the forefront of the fight against discrimination and for equal rights. What we take for granted today in terms of equality and justice hasn't always been true. For example, we've all heard of Aristotle. He's called the Father of Western Civilization. Well, you'd think Aristotle would be very enlightened, but he wasn't. He believed when you look at some groups of people, you can just tell they're born to be slaves. He didn't believe in equality and justice. Where did that idea come from?

The idea of equality and justice was really first championed by the early Christians, who believed every human being is made in the image of God. Granted, Christians haven't always gotten this right, but Christians were the first to fight for equality and justice. Christians led the way in creating hospitals because their founder, Jesus of Nazareth, healed the sick. Here in America, Christians have played important roles in many progressive movements dating back to the anti-slavery movement. After the Civil War, Christians fought for workers' rights, orphanages, and women's suffrage. Why is that? Because we believe each and every person is made in the image of God. Martin Luther King put it well: "Man is more than a tiny vagary of whirling electrons or a wisp of smoke from a limitless smoldering. Man is a child of God, made in His image, and therefore must be respected as such."

A first Century Example of Discrimination

This is why James had to address this issue head-on with the churches to which he wrote. He gave a specific example of the

kind of thing that was happening. He describes what was most likely a meeting of believers.

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 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," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? vv. 2-4

So one man comes in, and he's dressed to the hilt. He's probably someone important, perhaps even a kind of celebrity. But another man comes in, and he's dressed in rags. He's probably dirty and smelly. Let's visit this early church. What happens? Well, it seems they have a nearsighted usher suffering from a severe case of spiritual myopia.

Two guys arrive at church late, but for obviously different reasons. One man arrives late because he wants to be seen by others. The other man arrives late because he doesn't want to be seen by others. He just wants to slip into the service and worship God. The rich man arrives first. The nearsighted usher looks at him and says, "Sir, are we ever delighted to have you in our sanctuary! Come right down here." He takes him down to a choice seat. The pastor sees all this, and he's thinking, "I can hardly wait to pass the offering plate!" No sooner does the usher get to the back than the poor brother in rags shows up. He takes one look at him and thinks, "This guy will ruin our reputation." He says sarcastically, "Stand over there, and if that's not convenient, sit on the floor."

James paints this picture; then, he asks the first of several rhetorical questions. "When this happens, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" The obvious answer is, "Yes, we have!" When you divide people up and treat them differently based on external factors, you've put yourself in place of God and become judges, and not righteous judges but judges with evil thoughts. They'd developed a distorted perspective toward people. Their evaluation was on the basis of the material rather than the spiritual; the temporal rather than the eternal; the external rather than the internal. Of course, we'd never do anything like this, would we?

Recently a pastor friend of mine told me Steph Curry moved to the Peninsula and is looking for a new church. Every pastor on the Peninsula is now earnestly praying that he chooses their church! And if Steph Curry walked in here one Sunday morning, how would we handle that? How would he be treated in the parking lot? How would his kids be treated in the CPCKids rooms? What would happen if he came in here and there were no good seats? We live in a celebrity culture. Do not let that seep into the

church! Scripture says, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart." What do we look at?

Now what I love about God's word is it doesn't just tell us what to do or what not to do, but it also tells us why. It gives us reasons. And so, in the next few verses, James gives three reasons why discrimination is wrong.

Discrimination is wrong because God has chosen the poor

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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? But you have dishonored the poor. vv. 5-6a

Now please see here, James does not say God has chosen only the poor, nor does he say that God has chosen all the poor. There are still many poor people who are spiritually poor, and there are also rich people who are spiritually rich. But James wants us to know that poor people are spiritually advantaged. It is a historical fact that the early church was made up of the poorer classes. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "*Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth*" (1 Corinthians 1:26).

Granted, there were some who appear to have been well-off like Barnabas, Lydia, and Philemon, but it was largely the poor and disadvantaged who came to Christ. God chooses the poor, not because they're poor, but because they're responsive to him. And it's not like God just settles for them because that's all he can get. No! He deliberately chooses them for himself. He invests them with worth. He makes them rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom he promised to those who love him.

In the third century, there was a Christian leader named Lawrence, who was a deacon in the Church of Rome. He was in charge not only of "holy things" (like the Communion chalices and candlesticks), but also the church's treasury and its mercy fund. In Lawrence's day, public opinion had turned against followers of Christ, and one day the prefect of the city asked Lawrence to gather up and give him the wealth of the church. Lawrence sent back a message: "I don't deny our Church is rich and that no one in the world is richer, not even the emperor. I'll bring forth all the precious things that belong to Christ, if only you will give me a little time to gather everything together." The prefect agreed as he dreamed of what he could do with the money, gold, and silver.

For three days, Lawrence ran about the city, collecting the church's treasures. But they weren't the sort of treasures the greedy prefect was dreaming of. Instead, Lawrence walked through Rome and gathered the church's real treasure—the poor, the disabled, the blind, the homeless, and the lepers. He wrote down their names and lined them up at the entrance to

the church. Only then did he seek out the prefect to bring him to the church. "These are the treasures of the Church of Christ!" Lawrence declared as he presented the ragged crowd to the astonished prefect. "Their bodies may not be beautiful, but within these vessels of clay, they bear all the treasures of divine grace."

If that's how God thinks of the poor, if he chooses them for himself and makes them heirs of the kingdom, how can we dishonor them? That's what James says at the start of verse six, "But you have dishonored the poor." God says your treatment of the poor could not be more different from mine. I honor them; you dishonor them. Of course, we shouldn't dishonor the rich either, but if one tire on a car is low in air, we give extra attention to that tire until it's inflated as the rest. That's why we should take special measures to welcome and care for the poor and disadvantaged among us.

Discrimination is wrong because the rich exploit the poor

Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? vv. 6b-7

The answer to all these questions is yes. It's a matter of historical record the Jewish-Christians of that day were exploited by both Jews and Gentiles. The rich actually did violently drag them into court. Sometimes it was to possess property or collect debts and even have them placed in a debtor's prison if they couldn't pay. And many of these people did blaspheme the name by which they were called. So he's not talking here about rich believers. He's talking about rich blasphemers who persecuted them not just because they were poor but because they were Christians. James is saying it's rather strange to kowtow to those who treat you and your God like that. It's like you're aligning yourself with your oppressors.

There is something here that's easy to miss. When he says the rich "...are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?" he literally says, "the name that has been called upon you." He may very well mean the name of Jesus, or he may mean the name Christian, which was a name applied to early believers as a way of ridiculing and scorning them (Acts 11:26). James may be saying the name used as an insult is actually a noble, fair, and honorable name. When I became a Christian in 1974, we were called Jesus Freaks. It was a label meant to ridicule us. But in fact, we really should have been very proud of that label. In fact, DC Talk did a song called *Jesus Freak*, and the chorus goes like this:

What will people think

When they hear that I'm a Jesus freak

What will people do when they find that it's true

I don't really care if they label me a Jesus freak

There ain't no disguising the truth

I like that. That's what James is saying to these poor and persecuted believers, and that's what James says to us. Whenever people sneer at you and say, "Oh, you're just one of these narrow-minded Christians," remember that's a noble name; that's a fair and honorable name. It's like he said back in 1:9, "Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position." In other words, hold your head up. Don't kowtow to those people. Know who you are. Know whose you are. You may be poor, but you're heirs of God's kingdom!

Discrimination is wrong because it is a violation of Scripture

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. vv. 8-11

When he mentions "the royal law," he uses a term used by Greek writers to refer to a law duly enacted by a king. James is thinking of Jesus, the King of kings. King Jesus said, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*," which came right out of the Old Testament law in Leviticus 19:18. The royal law is the law of love. Jesus said the whole law can be summed up in this one dictum about love. James says if you keep that law, you are doing right. But if you show favoritism and partiality, deferring to an influential person over a needy person, you're not loving either of them. You're doing it out of selfish motives.

And then he goes even further and says when you do this, you're not breaking one little commandment among many, you're breaking the whole law! I think James is getting at our tendency to think like this, "Well, I may fall a little short in this area, but I make up for it in other areas." James uses the example of adultery and murder. It's like, "I'll love you enough not to sleep with your wife, but if you rip me off, I'll come after you with a vengeance." But James says obedience to one precept of the law is no excuse for disobedience to another. When you violate the law even in what you consider the smallest way, you rebel against the whole thing. The law is like a pane of glass. If you break one part of it, the whole thing is broken.

Christians should act in ways consistent with judgment and mercy

James has given us three reasons not to discriminate. I don't know about you, but I'm left with one question: How do I do this? I mean, I know my own heart. I know my own propensity to judge people by appearances and ultimately by what they can do for me. What James does in the last two verses is tell us how.

How can we be people who do not judge and discriminate based on outward appearances and instead be people of justice and mercy?

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

There are a couple of things I want you to notice. Notice he says we should speak and act as those accountable to “the law that gives freedom.” We saw that same phrase, the law that gives freedom in 1:25. We talked about it last week. How can the law give freedom? The law tells us what we can’t do. But freedom isn’t doing whatever we want; it’s the freedom to be who we were created to be.

Think of a fish. As I said last week, a fish was created with gills and fins. In other words, a fish was created to exist in water, not on land. If you lay a fish on the ground and leave it there, it will die. It can lay on the ground, but that’s not freedom. A fish is really only free to be what it was created to be when it’s in the water, restricted from land. That’s the law that sets it free. God’s word places restrictions on us, but those restrictions are put there because they’re in accord with how we’re created. We are only truly free when we’re obeying God’s law because it was given to us like a doctor gives a patient a prescription. We can refuse it, but we do so to our own peril. When we cast off favoritism and partiality and live by the laws of mercy and justice, we’re swimming in the waters that God created us for!

The second thing he says is God will show no mercy to those who are unmerciful, but mercy triumphs over judgment. What does that mean? There is a judgment for believers. It won’t determine our salvation, but it will determine our reward. And if we show no mercy, we can expect no mercy from God. It’s not that we earn God’s favor by showing mercy, but rather that if we do not show mercy, it reveals we’ve not been forgiven. Those who know God’s unlimited mercy will show mercy to others, both the rich and the poor.

But, still, all of us know how imperfectly we do that. We fall short every day. Knowing that, James ends saying, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” This is God’s mercy for us, which was demonstrated in the cross of Christ. At the cross, justice was fully done, its claims were fully met, and God’s mercy to sinners triumphed over judgment. The more we soak in that truth, the

more merciful we will be towards each and every person we meet, no matter their station in life.

The ground really is level at the foot of the cross, and that should be truer in the church than anywhere else. Let me just put it very bluntly: This will not be a church where preferential treatment is given to those our society deems important. The color of your skin won’t matter. Whether or not you went to college or where you went to college won’t matter. Your employment status won’t matter. Whether you’re blue-collar or white-collar won’t matter. Whether you’re Democrat or Republican won’t matter. Whether or not you’re a US Citizen won’t matter. I could go on and on, but you get the point. Here, at the foot of the cross, we are ALL on level ground!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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