

A Biblical Warning against Favoritism in the Church

SCOTT HOEZEE

As a pastor, I sometimes wondered how I would feel if shortly before a worship service some Sunday morning, I discovered that a very famous person was in my congregation that day. Would such a person's presence make me nervous? Would it make me wish I had a better sermon than the one I had prepared? Of course, I have to confess that I never wondered anything similar in case a local, homeless person showed up at worship some week. That probably indicates I have a spiritual problem. The Apostle James has a diagnosis for that problem, and some stern words for dealing with it. Today on Groundwork, we will dig into James 2 to see what James had to say on the subject of showing favoritism.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are in part two now of a seven-part series on the letter of James; a letter that was kind of a broadly distributed letter. It was not addressed to any particular congregation, as we noticed on the first program in this series; and today we are going to James 2, and let's just get right to it, to hear what James has to say, and then we will start to unpack these words in the rest of the program.

¹My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy, old clothes also comes in. ³If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes, and say, "Here is a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit on the floor by my feet," ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

DAVE BAST

⁵Listen, 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 to those who love Him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of Him to whom you belong? So, that is a powerful passage. That is another one of the famous ones in James.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I guess it goes without saying that James would not have bothered to write this if he had not known that this was happening; that this was going on.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, exactly. In our first program we talked about the trials that he mentions right off the bat, and surely, that indicates that they were experiencing trials; and here there must have been something like this going on in their worship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There must have been. He must have heard some reports about wealthy people in maybe some of the bigger cities of the ancient world showing up for worship and getting flattered and being given the royal... roll out the red carpet for the rich guy; but the poor people who show up: Yeah, well, you just stand over there. So this must have been happening; and it is interesting, this is one of many New Testament examples – and we see it reflected in Paul’s letters and Peter’s letters, and we see it in the book of Acts; there really was never – sometimes we get nostalgia for the early Church – it must have been great. Well, no, not so much. The Bible is honest. There were troubles all along.

DAVE BAST

Yes; what he is talking about is really an inveterate habit of human beings, whether it is in the Church or out of the Church, we all tend to engage in hero worship or, if not hero worship, hero envy. We are always looking up and looking for someone to look up to. In former times, it was nobility or an aristocracy, inherited by birth...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Kings.

DAVE BAST

These are the kings and the nobles. C. S. Lewis points out, interestingly, that this is so ingrained in human nature that when we get rid of the aristocrats we substitute millionaires and movie stars to look up to; so think about the celebrity-ism in our culture, and how there is so much attention paid to them; and somehow we think that they are different. As someone said, “The rich are not like you and me,” so what happens when such a person comes into our church, where everyone is supposed to be the same, and yet, we are tempted to show favoritism.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And favoritism – interesting word – it is used several times in James 2; and the Greek word here is a rare word. I think it is mostly found just here. It does not seem to be a word that was used in other Greek literature. Literally, the Greek word that James uses here means to take hold of the face, which kind of sounds like a funny word. What does that have to do with favoritism? To take hold of someone’s face. Well, here is where it came from. In the ancient world, and also in the Old Testament world, when you met a king or a noble person, you as a common, ordinary person would bow down to the ground. You would bow your face down toward the ground. Well, you would not assume you would dare look the king in the face unless invited. So, what the king would do if you found favor in the king’s eyes, he would take ahold of your face with his hand and lift your face so you could look him eye to eye after all, and now you are accepted; and that is where this word for favoritism comes from. It means to take hold of the face. So, James is saying: Look, when the rich people show up, do not bow down your face to the ground and wait for them to lift it up – to ennoble you – as though they are better than you. No, no, no, no, no. So, that is sort of the background of the word and the concept, and it does have to do with literally bowing down in front of others.

DAVE BAST

You know, it brings to mind Jesus’ comment about the rich; where He says on one occasion – one of His jokes, incidentally – we presume it was a joke. It is kind of a humorous image: How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom. When He saw that rich, young man walk away – turn away from Him after Jesus challenged him to sell everything and come and follow Him. Riches can often be an impediment to discipleship; and so Jesus comments: It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to come into the kingdom. And Jesus’ disciples are scandalized by this statement because they naturally thought that the rich are highly favored by God; and so they say: Who then can be saved? Jesus goes on: With men, this is impossible; but with God all things are possible. So, there is the kind of strange thing that we are tempted to admire such people and fall all over ourselves when we see them and hope that they lift up our face, you know, and show us favor; but, James and Jesus are both saying: Hey, it is not like

that. These are people like us and we should not be making this kind of ado about them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In fact, James is going to basically say, and is saying, when this happens; when those kinds of stratifications – those social stratifications – when that happens in the Church, and we start bowing down in front of other people – and by the way, then we would expect our lessers to bow down in front of us – that is creating great mayhem with something that is pretty close to the core of the Gospel; and we are going to look at what that is next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are in James Chapter 2 today, Dave; where James warns against favoritism within the congregation, and we noted that the word that he is using there is the equivalent of someone else lifting up your face after you have bowed down in front of them; and James is saying that just is not the way we should relate to each other when we gather for worship in the name of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is kind of showing excessive deference to someone, or sort of oohing and ahing and falling all over them because they are obviously of a higher class or a higher order; and James points out a couple of very practical things about this; and one of them is, you know, how stupid can you be, Christians? These are some of the very same people who are persecuting you – connecting to the idea of trials in Chapter 1 – and here is an interesting detail. When James describes the example of a person coming in wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, he says; well, a ring on a man in the ancient Roman Empire was a symbol of Roman citizenship...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, yes.

DAVE BAST

And a gold ring was the symbol of a senator or an aristocrat; somebody of the highest class. So, the very class of people who were engaged most intensely in persecuting the Church by the time James is writing – maybe by the 60s, of the First Century – are the ones that we are fawning over if one of them should happen to show up in one of our worship services. It just does not make sense. They have got it backwards.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and so, there is a very practical reason that James advances here for not doing this. Why be so nice to people who are not nice to you? The first chance they get, they will slap you into irons. They will take everything you have. That is sometimes how rich people stay rich; they take what you have, and that was happening in the ancient world. So, very practically, do not do that; but there is a more theological reason underneath this, that when you have a poor person come in and say: You just sit at my feet, and a rich person comes in and you say: Oh, you take the best seat. You are keeping the social stratifications within the body of Christ, and that works against Jesus somehow... and so, James begins that passage...

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; that is just worldliness. That is what the world does. The world has VIP sections, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; first class...

DAVE BAST

For VIPs, or they fly first class... or better yet, they fly on private jets. The rest of us are in coach. But that is not how it can be in the kingdom. There is no first class, VIP, coach, peons. This is what he says; listen: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom? That is exactly what Paul says in I Corinthians: Not many of you are wise; not many of you are noble; not many of you are powerful... God chose the weak and the despised.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You honor all the wrong people. You are God's kind of people; and you know why He says... So, he begins this passage – he refers to them – interesting phrase – as believers in the glorious Lord Jesus; and then later he talks about these rich people blaspheming Jesus' name. For James, it is all about Jesus, and James knew as well as anybody that his brother – literally his brother Jesus – came to be the servant of all. Jesus was never going around throwing His weight around Palestine. He was humble; He hung out with the poor, they were his favorite dinner companions, much to the annoyance of the snooty Pharisees, who did not want to have anything to do with these people. So, the poor were Jesus' kind of people. Jesus was a poor person, and every chance He got, He would put a little child in front of the disciples to say: Look, you know, this little kid? Humble, even humiliated in the eyes of the some people in our society? Be like that. I did not come to be served; but to serve; and to sacrifice my life. So, in other words, when we let the social stratifications come into the church and we have a first class section in our sanctuaries for the rich, who can afford to fly first class; and when we make the poor sit in the back and get our water for us, we are erasing the Gospel – we are erasing the Jesus from our midst, who came to level all of that and who says: Look, I do not care who you are – rich, poor, in between – you all need the same thing to be saved, and that is my sacrifice on the cross. We are all the same. We are all ennobled by the same blood of Jesus. So, as soon as this stratification comes into the Church, Jesus disappears – the Jesus of the Gospels, who was humble.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, I think we could sort of summarize this by saying, according to James, favoritism is bad for you – you Christians – because you are showing honor and deference to the very class of people who are going after you and hurting you. It is bad for the Church, James says, because it introduces distinctions that the world loves to make that have no place in the Church – in the body of Christ. You know, as we like to say, the ground is level at the foot of the cross; we are all the same there; but, furthermore, I think we could say it is bad for the rich person him or herself to be treated this way, because, you know how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom; well, there is only one way, and that is if they come to humble themselves and to see their need and to realize that they, too, are sinners.

I think of something Luther once said when he was criticized for attacking the Pope, and Luther supposedly said: Oh, I am sorry; I thought he was just a stinking sinner like the rest of us. That is what people need to hear. They need to hear that however they are treated in the world, they have this basic need, which is to humble themselves – get low – and come to Jesus like the rest of us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And by the way, there is a reason why the world has been somewhat taken by storm by Pope Francis. You mentioned the Pope a minute ago. I think Luther would like Pope Francis because Pope Francis has worked so hard to identify with the poor. He took the name of Francis of Assisi, who was the minister to the poor; but he has been known to slip out of the Vatican at night to serve people. He washes people's feet. He is one of the people, and that has taken the world by storm to see the Pope not wanting to live like a rich person. That reminds me, too, of a very, very wealthy person whom I know, and I think you know who this person is, too, Dave – we will not say who it is, but every time I have heard this person give a speech, the first thing he says is: Hi, I am so-and-so, and I am a sinner saved by grace. And that is not saccharin piety on his part. He is a wealthy person, and he needs to remind himself that he is the same as everybody else.

DAVE BAST

But he also is being honest, and he means it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; yes.

DAVE BAST

That is who I am; and that is who we all are. It is good to remember that. It is good to come together humbly – to humble... You know, there is so much in the New Testament about just humbling yourself – getting low – not being puffed up; and especially in a celebrity-besotted culture like ours, we need to hear this again and take the lesson to heart.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is the shoe that pinches all of us a little bit. I am afraid that it is true of all of us that if a certain member of our community – I do not care where we live – it could be California, New York, Iowa, South Dakota, Michigan – if there is a certain member of the community who is a member of our church, we still wear that like a badge of honor sometimes. Well, so and so goes to our congregation. We all are tempted by this, and James wants to bring us down to the level of grace and to seeing each other at eyelevel; not waiting to lift each other's faces, as though we have to do that.

DAVE BAST

Well, this is important stuff; and there is one more thing we want to look at in James 2, and we will do that in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, where we are listening to James and what he has to say in the second chapter; and Dave, we have been talking all about the theme of favoritism, and how we just cannot let those social stratifications creep into the Church because it works at odds with grace, and it works at cross purposes with who Jesus was as the servant of all.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is bad for the Church, we said, and it also bad for the individuals in question – both for those who show the favoritism, because they are playing a little bit of celebrity-itis in doing that – and for those who receive this sort of special treatment, it is not healthy spiritually for them. So, it is really all about what James is going to call here in Chapter 2, the royal law, which is a really interesting phrase – the king's law – the law of the king – and it is expressed in scripture. Jesus did it first when He was asked to summarize the Law, and He said it is all about love – loving God with all you heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself.

So, let's listen to James' take on that from Chapter 2. We will read verses 8 through 12:

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right; ⁹but if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law, and yet stumbles at just one point, is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹For 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

And so, there we have seen in this series, and we will have occasion to see again, James could be kind of a hard man, and he does not pull any punches; so, he is basically – now, this is still following up on this favoritism thing – James is saying: Look, you might think it is not such a big deal to fawn all over that rich

man and shove aside the poor man who showed up for church, but you are breaking the law: Love your neighbor as yourself; and you break one law, you have broken them all. So, good luck.

DAVE BAST

Kind of hard-nosed, isn't he?

SCOTT HOEZEE

A little bit.

DAVE BAST

So, like it does not matter? So, we might as well break all of the commandments if you break... But what I think what he is trying to get at is the fact that the Law is of a piece, and all the various commandments – you think of the Ten Commandments – about lying and stealing and adultery, and all the rest – they are all about, at bottom, how we ought to love one another; so if you sin against your neighbor in one way – let's say by cheating them or defrauding them, or by breaking a commitment of marriage – you have hurt them, just as much – maybe not in the same way – as if you had killed them. It is all a kind of killing of the relationship. It is all an offence against the law of love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even you diminish them. In the Heidelberg Catechism, which is sort of a big standard in the Reformed tradition; the Heidelberg Catechism on that commandment... What is God really forbidding when He says you shall not murder? It goes on and makes those lists, and it includes diminishing somebody in any way; criticizing somebody, cutting somebody down to size with your words; those are all forms of murder, the Catechism says, because you are taking away someone else's dignity and this is someone created in the image of God; and that is what you are doing to poor people when they show up at church, James is saying, and you treat them like dirt, you treat them like they are just not worth as much because their clothes are a little dirty. No, no, no, no, you absolutely cannot do that; but he also makes an interesting theological move here, saying: Oh, by the way; God is not going to do that either. God is not going to show favoritism. If you receive mercy from God, it is not because you are so well off or that you were outwardly impressive; mercy is going to come to those who do not deserve it; which, by the way, is everybody.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think of the lesson Peter learned in his encounter with Cornelius; "Now I know," he says, "that God is no respecter of persons." Great phrase: God is no respecter of persons. He is not impressed by the things that we flaunt. Peter Devries, the novelist, has a great phrase where he says: People going around clanging their status symbols. God is not impressed by that kind of thing – by the car we drive or the clothes that we wear or the house where we live; but that is, in a sense, the bad news. He is not impressed... but the good news is, He does not care who you are. He is not prejudiced against any one person or group. He will show favor to all, and we need to respond to that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we said in this program, Dave, that the Greek word that James uses several times here in Chapter 2, which is translated in most bibles as favoritism, is this word about lifting up the face; and we said in the first segment that that is what rich people in the world – or kings in the world – used to do. If you bowed down in front of a king, he would lift up your face to say you are accepted; but that is not how it works. There is that great line in what we call the Aaronic benediction from Numbers 6: The benediction of Aaron that many of us who have gone to church we have heard so many times: The Lord bless you and keep and make His face to shine upon you. The Lord lift up *His* face upon *you*, and be gracious to you. That is sort of a reversal of our letting a rich man lift up our face to accept us. Aaron was saying, and God was saying in Numbers 6, by grace *I* lift up *My* face upon *you*, and that is grace, and that is mercy, and that comes to everybody. Once that has happened – once God has lifted up His face and shined on you – then that should change how you look at everybody; and it means you are not going to see people as rich or poor or famous or important or unimportant. Everybody is important, and you know that because God elevated you by grace.

DAVE BAST

I mean, it is radically transforming to how we view ourselves, as well as how we view others. The thing is, God's purpose in the Gospel is to ennoble all of us. *Ennoble*. You know, we are all going to be lifted to that level that the world's pseudo distinction tries to reinforce, and that never worked. One of the most beautiful psalms, Psalm 113, says of God, speaking of His greatness: He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap to seat them with princes – with the princes of His people. That is how grace operates. He takes us all when we are in the dust – when we are cast away on the ash heap of the world or of our lives, and He lifts us up – He raises us – He ennobles us. Grace transforms us into someone special.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have to get C. S. Lewis in here before we finish here today. We have quoted this before; Lewis's great sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, in which he basically says: Because of God's grace, if you could see everybody through the lens of grace and what grace does to people, then the lowliest person that you could imagine would shine in your eyes like the brightest angel of heaven. That is what we will all look like in the kingdom one day; and so, when you know what grace is, you do not spend your time in the church showing favoritism to only a few; you are just too gobsmacked by the fact that we are all children of God. We all get to say: Abba, Father, by grace alone, and that transforms how we view and treat all people.

DAVE BAST

Everybody gets the best seat. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/a-biblical-warning-against-favoritism-in-the-church>

Printed on February 5, 2025