

Wisdom for Wholeness: Don't Play Favorites

James 2:1-13 (Part 2)

I thought it would be good this morning to remind you of our goal in this study of the book of James that we are pursuing together. Here at WBC we tend to go slowly through books of the bible and there are wonderful advantages to that technique, but one of the major disadvantages is that it's very often hard to keep in mind the overall message of the book.

The title for the series is Wisdom for Wholeness. Let me split that into two parts and then put it back together again. First of all, let's talk about wisdom. We typically think of wisdom as something we gain from books like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. The OT does have texts devoted to wisdom, but James is a wonderful example of a NT book instructing us in how to live life well. He wants us to know how to live according to God's design for us as human beings and in light of God's redemptive plan given in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But that wisdom is not an end in itself. The second part of our title is wholeness. To be whole is to be complete. If you were describing a basketball player who was good at everything, rebounding, shooting, defense and passing, you would say he is the total package. He has a complete game.

James wants you and me to be complete Christians. He wants us to develop in every area of our Christian lives, from our response to trials, to handling temptation, to the way we treat poor people. His burden is that we would grow to Christlikeness and the pathway to wholeness is through wisdom.

Last week we began chapter 2 and James is discussing a topic that we may be tempted to view as mostly unimportant or mostly applicable to someone else. But, partiality or favoritism is a subtle sin that can splinter our walk with Christ and growth in godliness and certainly can cause major damage to the unity of the church.

So, last week we started studying this passage and we are looking at **4 Problems with Partiality for those Pursuing Wisdom in Christ.**

1. You Can't Have Partiality and True Faith (v. 1)

To show partiality means to treat someone else differently, either positively or negatively because of some external criteria. Look at verse 1. This way of dealing with people is incompatible with the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because He is the Lord of Glory. He's the one who became poor for us. He was despised so we could be accepted. Not only is partiality incompatible with true faith but the criteria we employ to judge are evil at root. This is our second problem.

2. You Judge Based on Evil Criteria (vv. 2-4)

Look with me at James's example in verses 2-3. The real problems with acting in this way are found in verse 4. You make distinctions among yourselves. You treat others as more or less important because of differences. You assign moral superiority or inferiority to a person based on external criteria. And verse 4 tells us that the criteria we use are evil. We have become the judges and we use our own twisted and wicked criteria in order to exalt some and belittle others. And because we use our own judgment, we ignore God's judgment and this is our 3rd problem.

3. You Ignore God's Judgment (vv. 5-7)

God deals with us based purely on His grace and not on any external criteria. Look at verse 5. But when we become the judges and act in partiality we act in a worldly manner and ignore God's grace to us. And this brings us to the last problem, which is probably the most vital of all of them.

4. You Fail to Love (vv. 8-13)

In this paragraph James pulls everything together from his discussion of partiality in verses 1-7. And he begins this section in verses 8-9 by giving us the positive action that our Lord calls us to and the negative result when we act in favoritism or discrimination toward others. Look at verse 8.

One of the things that people love about the book of James is that it seems to be very practical and very earthy. James is matter of fact and straightforward. He's certainly doing that here when he says "if you really fulfill." Maybe you remember a time when a parent or teacher looked at you and said, "Did you really do your best to clean everything up?" You know in your heart that even though you told them you were done that really you just shoved the clothes in the closet and

smashed the door shut. It's like James knows that we all will read this passage and go, "James, I honestly can't think of a way that I show partiality."

But James isn't interested in nice words without actions. Keep in mind 1:22. And here he's calling us to obey the royal law. I want you to notice what he does here. In verse 8 he quotes Leviticus 19:18. And so, you might be tempted to think that the "royal law" means that we must obey the OT law in its entirety. But of course, none of you hear today keep all the details of the OT law, so what gives?

James calls this the royal law because of the way Jesus fulfilled and taught the OT. You and I don't obey the OT law in its details anymore because Jesus fulfilled it. Listen to Matthew 5:17-20. What that passage means is that the OT law, the Mosaic law, finds its goal and culmination in the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus. He's the true interpreter of the law and he has brought it to completion and fulfillment. And of course, Jesus taught that the entire law could be summarized in two commandments. Listen to Matthew 22:37-40.

So, when James says the "royal law" he's saying that we do look back to the OT law and read it and apply it in light of Jesus, the true King, whom the law pointed to. We could also call this the kingly law and it is the summary of the ethic of his kingdom. Listen to Jesus in John 13:34-35.

Of course, this is a dominant theme in the NT for how believers live with one another. Listen to how the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 13:8-10. Listen to the Apostle John in 1 John 3:16-18.

The problem for most of us today is that the word love has been so stripped down and sentimentalized that we aren't even sure what it means to love another human. Is it affection? Is it just a matter of doing the right thing?

As believers the Bible makes it absolutely clear as to what shapes our understanding of love. Listen to 1 John 4:7-12. If you aren't clear as to what it looks like to love your co-worker or your fellow church member, or your spouse, learn the love of God expressed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let the Spirit shed that love abroad in your heart so that you are formed into a truly loving person.

But James makes it clear that partiality is the opposite of that love. Look at verse 9. To show favoritism or discrimination is not a small matter. Two things have happened. First, you have committed sin. Sin is a missing of the mark. It's a

departure from the righteous standard God has set. Sin is anything that misses that standard. And second, because you have departed in your actions, desires, or speech from God's standards, you are now a transgressor of God's law. In other words, you are a law breaker.

But if we're honest, most human beings don't think of themselves as law-breakers. Most people would say, I'm no criminal. I try hard and I'm sure I've done more good than bad. We think of sin as eating and good works as exercise. If you just exercise a little more you can make up for that lemon Key Lime Pie. But to be a transgressor of God's law is a status that is not difficult at all to obtain. James explains this in verses 10-11. This is like a digression or an aside to explain the word transgressor in verse 9.

James is warning his readers and us by extension that we cannot show partiality and act without love and imagine that we are good to go with God. The point is that you can't pick and choose what laws you will obey and which one's you won't obey. Man that is what we do. We would never actively say, "I'm not obeying the Bible here." But we find a work-around or two. We read what the Bible says about our words in James 1:26 and we say, "yeah but" I'm just a straight shooter. The people on Facebook need to hear my point of view. We read what Jesus teaches about attachment to material wealth and we shrug it off.

Verse 11 makes it clear that the law of God comes to us as a unity because there is one lawgiver. The command to love your neighbor as yourself and to not commit adultery and not murder are not just rules written down on a page. We aren't dealing with a recipe for a nice life and these happen to be ingredients that you can include or not include based on your preferred taste. Scripture comes to us from a person and to discount His commands is to place yourself above Him.

The entire point of this aside in verses 10-11 is that James wants those reading his letter to reckon with their own sinfulness and partiality. This is a warning against shrugging off any of God's Words and particularly the sin of partiality. Having made this warning, now in verses 12-13 James returns to the positive exhortations toward wisdom and wholeness. But these exhortations come with a very clear warning about the future. Look at verse 12.

Notice the two commands at the beginning of verse 12. Speak and act. James has been quite clear that we must be those who act on what we hear. He's also been

clear that our words must reflect our new life in Christ. Both our words and actions must be done with the understanding that we will one day stand before the King. Look at the rest of verse 12. What does it mean that we will be judged by the perfect law of liberty? James is pointing to the standard to which we will be held. Of course, the law of liberty is the Bible and the idea is that Scripture provides true liberty for us.

We talked about this in James 1:25. Many people think of commands as restrictive, but they really free us to be who we were designed to be. Paul works this out in Galatians 5:13-14. The law of liberty is the law that calls us to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others. It's the law of love (v. 14). The law of liberty can be summarized as "love your neighbor as yourself." To speak and act as one who is held accountable to the law of liberty is to, as Galatians 5 says, use your freedom to serve others. It's to love and sacrifice for those around you. This now is the royal law for those of us who are kingdom citizens. Sacrificial love of others is the standard by which we are held.

So, how can you tell if you are living out this royal law? Look at verse 13. This a warning but gives us a very clear way of knowing if we are faithful to the law of liberty. The warning is that if we show partiality and don't show mercy to those around us, we will not receive mercy on judgment day. That sounds serious. It is. This isn't the only place teaching like this is found in Scripture. Jesus taught this very thing in Matthew 18:21-25 in a parable.

Here's the point. How can we, who claim to have received undeserved mercy from God, then go on to withhold that mercy from those around us in need of it? When we live like that we demonstrate that we truly don't grasp the mercy of God. We have no idea what has been done for us and how undeserving we are of God's grace and mercy.

One of the surest signs that a person doesn't grasp the depths of their own sin and the reality of grace is that he or she treats others with contempt, partiality, pride, and discrimination. It's the flipside of what Jesus says in John 13 that we read earlier. All men will know you are my disciples by your love for one another. All men will recognize the hypocrisy of your faith when you don't show mercy but continue to lack love. And this is why James ends the way he does in verse 13.

When we demonstrate mercy it proves the reality of our faith in Christ and will ultimately be what triumphs over judgment in the judgment day.

Fighting this sin of partiality with the mercy and grace of God is exactly where we need to be as those pursuing wisdom for wholeness. Listen again to the center passage in the book of James that gives us our theme. James 3:13-18.