

3/22/09

Favoritism

James 2:1-13

Introduction

His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He is brilliant; kind of esoteric and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college. Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but are not sure how to go about it. One day, Bill decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started and so Bill starts down the aisle looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat. By now people are looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer to the pulpit and when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. Although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, trust me, this had never happened in this church before! By now, the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick. About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, a deacon is slowly making his way toward Bill. Now this deacon is in his eighties; he has silver-gray hair, a three-piece suit, and a pocket watch. He's a godly man - very elegant, very dignified, and very courtly. He walks with a cane and as he starts toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves, "You can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor?" It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The people are thinking, "The minister can't even preach the sermon until the deacon does what he has to do." And then they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships with him so he won't be alone. Everyone chokes up with emotion. When the minister gains control, he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

How often have we judged someone based on their appearance? It happens all the time. Someone who looks a little rough approaches us on the street and our hand goes directly to our wallet. In extreme cases, I have known those that have actually crossed to the other side of the street to avoid walking past someone who looks intimidating. Have you ever felt that you were being judged based upon how you look or how you are dressed? How about the way in which you talk? When you go to a job interview, what's the thing that concerns you the most? I know when I have interviewed for jobs, I have always been concerned with that first impression. I put on my best suit, don the perfect "power" tie, and actually rehearse what I will say to the interviewer when I meet him or her. I even practice speaking without my Appalachian drawl so that I will appear more intelligent. I try to walk with confidence with my back straight, my shoulders drawn back slightly, and my chin up. I look the interviewer in the eye and carefully, methodically phrase the answers to their questions doing my best to always use correct English. Why? Because I realize that at least initially, I am being judged based primarily on my appearance and how I carry myself. My qualifications, experience, and education are all shown on my resume; the interview is to find out what I am like in person and if I will fit in well with the organization. I understand that the first impression the interviewer has on me will carry a lot of weight later in the interview as we talk about the specifics of the job and my qualifications. But, judgments are also made on other elements besides appearance and status. There are other prejudices that exist: skin color, cultural background, religious beliefs, age, and occupation, just to name a few. Right or wrong, there are preconceived notions each of us has as to what certain people MUST be like based on external traits and circumstances.

For example, there is the story of a middle-aged, well-off white South African lady on a flight from Johannesburg who finds herself seated next to a black man. She calls the cabin crew attendant over to complain about her seating. "What seems to be the problem, madam?" asks the attendant. "Can't you see?" she says. "You've sat me next to a kaffir. I can't possibly sit next to this disgusting human. Find me another seat!" "Please calm down madam," the stewardess replies. "The flight is very full today, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go check to see if we have any seats available in club or first class." The woman cocks a snooty look at the outraged black man beside her, not to mention many of the surrounding passengers. A few minutes later, the stewardess returns with the good news, which she delivers to the lady, who cannot help but look at the people around her with a smug and self-satisfied grin. "Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. I've spoken to the cabin services director, and club is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class." Before the lady has a chance to answer, the stewardess continues, "It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, however, and I have had to get special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person." With which, she turns to the black man sitting next to the woman, and says, "So if you'd like to get your things, sir, I have your seat ready for you." At which point, the surrounding passengers stand and give a standing ovation while the black man walks up to the front of the plane. While this story is somewhat humorous and I'm sure we are all thinking that maybe this lady got her just desserts, how often have we judged someone else based on externals - simply by what they look like? I know I have and I have fought very hard to overcome these preconceived notions about people that seem to overtake me at times. We all tend to gravitate to those that are more like us - in appearance, background, beliefs, economic status, etc. As we come to James chapter 2, we find that the problem of favoritism is being addressed in the early Jewish church. This is not a new problem. Most of the issues that we deal with today have been around since the Fall, which is why the Bible is always relevant to our lives as believers in Christ. I don't usually use too many other versions of the scripture while teaching, but I really like the NLT's rendering of this passage. I will read verses 1-13.

"My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim that you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people more than others? For instance, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in shabby clothes. If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, 'You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor.' Well, doesn't this discrimination show that you are guided by wrong motives? Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him? And yet, you insult the poor man! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear? Yes indeed, it is good when you truly obey our Lord's royal command found in the Scriptures: 'Love you neighbor as yourself.' But if you pay special attention to the rich, you are committing a sin, for you are guilty of breaking that law. And the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as the person who has broken all of God's laws. For the same God who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' So if you murder someone, you have broken the entire law, even if you do not commit adultery. So whenever you speak, or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law of love, the law that set you free. For there will be no mercy for you if you have not been merciful to others. But if you have been merciful, then God's mercy toward you will win out over his judgment against you."

(pray)

DISCUSSION: What are some ways favoritism is shown in the church?

Why might people try to justify favoritism in church?

I. The first thing that James tells us here is that we are commanded to NOT show favoritism (v. 1). Favoritism comes in many forms: one child over another within a family, one employee over another in the work place, one student over the

others in school. It tends to make the one who is the favorite feel more important than they really are and the others who are not favored to feel less important than they really are. Think of all those who are professional athletes that believe they are above the law simply because they have received preferential treatment because of what they do for a living. Think of the people who have a lot of money who feel they should be given special privileges because of all they donate to charities or because their particular business employs many in a community. Now, think back through history and remember all the conflicts that have arisen because certain people groups have felt they were being discriminated against. Think of all the unrest caused even now because of people who think discrimination is a source of the difficulties in their lives. As much progress as has been made regarding discrimination of any kind, it still is a serious problem, even in the church. I was somewhat surprised to find how much the Bible actually addresses this issue. In Matthew 7:1-2, Jesus advises us not to judge others because we will be judged in the same manner as we judge others. "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you." (NKJV) Proverbs 18:5, Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25 and I Timothy 5:21 all exhort us to not show partiality because God does not show partiality. In other words, according to these scriptures and the passage we are studying this morning in James, favoritism is sin and those who are followers of Christ are to avoid it. We are to treat everyone the same regardless of their outward appearance, economic status, cultural background, whatever the difference may be. Although speaking specifically on the issue of race relations and reconciliation, Dr. Charles Ware makes a valid point for us regarding favoritism in the book "Darwin's Plantation". He says, "Rather than beginning with the truths and commands of Scripture (which are clear and pointed in regard to our relationships with our fellow human beings), the Church has been sucked into the depravity of worldly thinking when it comes to our relationships with those who look different than us. Until we are willing to embrace the Word of God as truth, beginning from Genesis chapter 1, we will be continually drawn into the philosophies and hatred of the world system." The world tends to look at those who are perceived as weaker or different with a wary eye. They inherently despise differences, regardless of the message of inclusion that is preached. That's one of the reasons there are so many conflicts in the world. Each people group thinks they are right and those that are different are wrong. The same seems to be true in the church - we tend to think that those who come through the doors that look different than us cannot be trusted and we keep them at arm's length and make it very difficult for them to be accepted into our group. Perhaps it stems from a lack of understanding these differences or maybe we forget that each person is created in the image of God and we are each loved by God the same. Maybe because we are Christians and know the true depravity of mankind, we approach everyone with a measure of distrust from the outset. Whatever the case may be, we are told here that favoritism and discrimination are sins that should be avoided. This brings us to another question I would like for us to discuss. Why is favoritism or prejudice often overlooked as a sin?

II. The second point that James asserts is that God has chosen the poor (v. 5-7). The passage tells us that the poor are rich in faith and they will inherit the Kingdom. This idea is reinforced in Luke 6:20-23. The Scripture says, "Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said, 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven. For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.'" Yes indeed, God holds a special place in His heart for the poor and oppressed. As I mentioned in a previous lesson, Jesus spent the majority of His time on earth ministering to the poor, the sick, the lame, the deaf, the blind, and the outcast. The followers that He chose were really nothing special by the world's standards. He often spoke of the difficulty the rich will have in making the commitment to Christ necessary for obtaining a place in heaven. Matthew 19:16-23 is the account of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus to inquire how he might make it to heaven. When Jesus tells him to sell all he has and follow Christ, he walks away sad because he is not willing to give up his worldly wealth. Jesus then makes the famous statement about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Verses 24-26 of Luke 6 that follow the passage I read a moment ago state, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets." James tells us that the rich exploit the poor, sue for more gain, and slander Christ and others to make themselves look better. The Bible doesn't appear to look too favorably upon those who are rich. Are we to assume, then, that it is sinful to be wealthy or impossible for a wealthy person to be saved? I don't think so. Abraham was very wealthy, as was Job, David, and Boaz. These are examples of those that were faithful to God even though they had great possessions. However, I think we are being warned that wealth can be a great stumbling block to a person's relationship with God and one's ability to follow Christ wholeheartedly. Even those of us that aren't necessarily considered wealthy, but are not hurting by any stretch of the imagination, either, have a difficult time remaining faithful to the cause of Christ.

a. Discussion:

- i. So, why would the poor be rich in faith?
- ii. Why does God have a special concern for poor people?
- iii. Why are the rich often treated as more important than the poor, even in the church?

b. Allow me to read a few excerpts from a list made by a writer named John Scalzi in response to the Katrina hurricane disaster in New Orleans about what it is like to be poor.

- i. Being poor is knowing exactly how much everything costs.
- ii. Being poor is hoping the toothache goes away.
- iii. Being poor is knowing your kid goes to friends' houses but never has friends over to yours.
- iv. Being poor is coming back to the car with your children in the back seat, clutching that box of Raisin Bran you just bought and trying to think of a way to make the kids understand that the box has to last.
- v. Being poor is hoping your kids don't have a growth spurt.
- vi. Being poor is thinking \$8.00 an hour is a really good deal.
- vii. Being poor is stopping the car to take a lamp from a stranger's trash.
- viii. Being poor is people angry at you just for walking around in the mall.
- ix. Being poor is not talking to that girl because she'll probably just laugh at your clothes.
- x. Being poor is hoping you'll be invited for dinner.
- xi. Being poor is needing that 35 cent raise.
- xii. Being poor is your kid's teacher assuming you don't have any books in your home.
- xiii. Being poor is six dollars short on the utility bill and no way to close the gap.
- xiv. Being poor is knowing you work as hard as anyone, anywhere.
- xv. Being poor is people surprised to discover you're not actually stupid.
- xvi. Being poor is people surprised to discover you're not actually lazy.
- xvii. Being poor is a six hour wait in an emergency room with a sick child asleep on your lap.
- xviii. Being poor is never buying anything someone else hasn't bought first.
- xix. Being poor is getting tired of people wanting you to be grateful.
- xx. Being poor is knowing you're being judged.
- xxi. Being poor is people who have never been poor wondering why you choose to be so.
- xxii. Being poor is knowing how hard it is to stop being poor.

xxiii. Being poor is seeing how few options you have.

xxiv. Being poor is running in place.

c. I have never been physically poor a day in my life. There have been times when money was tight and it was a struggle to meet the costs of living I have incurred, but I have never been at the point where I didn't know where my next meal was coming from. God has been very faithful to me, even though at times I have lived in absolute defiance of Him. James is telling us that God holds the poor in very high regard and we should do the same. At the beginning of chapter 2, he expands on his exhortation at the end of chapter 1 to care for those less fortunate than us because God cares for them the same as He cares for us and He has blessed us materially so that we can be used by Him to take care of them.

III. Finally, James informs us that it only takes one sin to convict us of breaking the entirety of God's Law (v. 10-13). As we have seen, God's standard is absolute perfection - obeying every one of the laws of God without a single indiscretion. He uses the example of murder and adultery, but why would he use such "serious" offenses? Why not choose something like gossip or lying? I have a theory. In Matthew 5, Jesus expands the Ten Commandments by stating that if someone looks at another woman lustfully, he has committed adultery with her in his heart and if someone hates someone, he has committed murder in his heart. For Jesus, sin is not just a matter of a physical act. Sin is also what a person feels or desires to do in his heart - it is as much about one's motives as it is about the action. Even if I put the blinders on and never look at another woman with sexual desire, if I hate someone and wish they were dead, that's the same as murdering them and I have sinned. Christ also goes on to say not only to love others as ourselves, but to love our enemies as well. If I do everything in my Christian walk that I am supposed to do, but show partiality, I have sinned. The point is, it only takes one sin - one lie, one evil thought, one misplaced desire, one act of disobedience - to fall short of God's perfect standard. And, if I will not show mercy to others, why should I expect to receive mercy from God? By God's grace, I will be shown mercy because of Christ, but that does not excuse me from showing the same mercy to others. In light of the love and mercy I have been shown by God through Christ, there should never be a question of whether I will show someone else the same measure of love and mercy.

Conclusion

H. A. Ironside pointed out the folly of judging others in his book "Illustrations of Bible Truth". A man named Bishop Potter was sailing for Europe on one of the great transatlantic ocean liners. When he went on board, he found that another passenger was to share the cabin with him. After going to see the accommodations, he came up to the purser's desk and inquired if he could leave his gold watch and other valuables in the ship's safe. He explained that ordinarily he never availed himself of that privilege, but he had been to his cabin and had met the man who was to occupy the other berth. Judging from his appearance, he was afraid that he might not be a very trustworthy person. The purser accepted the responsibility for the valuables and remarked, "It's all right, bishop, I'll be very glad to take care of them for you. The other man has been up here and left his for the same reason!" A very fitting reminder that if we judge others based upon their appearance, we may very well be judged in the same way. Remember that God does not look on the outward appearance of mankind, but rather, God judges the heart.

Closing discussion: In what practical ways can we show genuine love to people of different races, culture, or economic background?

(pray)