

2:1-13

They say, "You can tell what kind of a person you are by the company you keep." Not always. Maybe when we're speaking about friends and close associates but not when we are speaking about those we welcome and care for. James is speaking about the hospitality of the church especially in the context of the public gathering (i.e., worship). "Into your assembly" is from the Greek word for the Hebrew *synagogue* and also where Lutherans get the word "synod". It's about being together. And when Christians gather together, everyone must sincerely be welcome. There can be no partiality says James. It is human nature to be drawn to what is seen as beautiful in some way (James uses the example of those who are dressed nicely with expensive clothes and jewelry), but human nature is steeped in sin. The new nature we have in Christ being a new creation loves all without favoritism. James adds this, then, to the list for sanctified living by Christians. Show no partiality.

Question: Are there other ways people show favoritism?

One way the early Church was showing favoritism by some amounted to racial prejudice. Jews didn't welcome Gentiles. Now James doesn't address this issue specifically, but it is worth looking at in the greater context of our discussion of showing no partiality. This problem is compounded even more when we see that God chose the Jews initially as His people. Israel is the original covenant people. Paul acknowledges this in Romans 1:16. Let's look. So, does God show partiality? No.

What the Bible is showing us is that the Gospel is not a set of abstract rules and worship rites. It is a story, the story of God's love for His creation. From Genesis through Revelation, we witness the unfolding narrative of God's redeeming grace to save sinners of which all mankind is. With all stories, there is a who, a what, a where and a when. Jesus is the protagonist of God's redeeming story. It starts in a garden, then a nation, next a whole world and ends finally in an eternal heavenly kingdom. The story of God's covenant was first told to Noah, then Abraham, Moses, the prophets, some of the kings and finally was revealed in Bethlehem through a Jewish virgin girl. Most of that was a "Jewish" story at least in the context of its given history. This is what Jesus meant when He said to the woman at the well, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Thus James, the leader of the preeminent Jerusalem congregation, speaks in the mindset of the synagogue where the Gospel first spread. Fortunately for us, though, it didn't stay there. For God shows no partiality but so loved the whole world that He sent Jesus to be our Savior. Let's see now Romans 11:11-24 and Galatians 6:12-16.

People show a great deal about themselves by the things and the people they are attracted to. Prejudices come to light by the things and the people they avoid. In both, the true character of a person's love is revealed. Real love that grows like sweet fruit from the stem of Jesus in whom we are grafted is not biased. James uses the example of one impoverished as a possible prejudice. The poor man is made to sit in the corner or on the floor while the well dressed (because they have the money to afford such things) are given the seat of honor. There are any number of ways people can draw from appearance other socio-economic biases but as we've noted above, that is only one form of prejudice. But Christians are to strive to overcome their biases and see others as God does. In so doing we practice divine love.

Fear is often the motivating principle behind prejudices. People fear what seems different than them and are attracted to that which they wish to be. Ignorance is right behind fear. So, this command

to not show partiality, not to have prejudices, has a practical purpose as to love. It moves us to get to know people, all people. Making such an effort yields great rewards. One finds that others aren't so different after all. New friendships arise that one would never have thought of. When this happens in a Christian assembly, God's love is manifested as the tremendous gift that it is. James even uses such high language as in so doing, Christians are fulfilling the "royal" law. It is also called here the "law of liberty". As John puts it in his first epistle, "Perfect love drives out all fear." (4:18)

There is a warning, too. To fail in this regard is tantamount to failing the whole Law. To show partiality and therefore to not love as does God is the same as breaking the whole Law. Just because one hasn't committed adultery or murder (James' examples) doesn't make them righteous. Without true love for all, that appearance of morality is just self-righteousness. They will know we are Christians in the Church when we love without showing favoritism. That is keeping the Law of God.

Let's close by looking at two other passages that show the fundamental importance of love as a basis for keeping the Law of God. Matthew 22:34-40 and 1 Cor. 13:1-13