

In 2015, Tonight Show host Jimmy Fallon had the famous Irish band U2 disguise themselves and play at the 42nd St. subway station. The band performed their songs while busking for money. People were coming and going, heading home after a busy day of work. But few stopped to notice who the band was. With the band wearing shabby clothing and looking rough, it appeared that this was just another group trying to hustle a few dollars. But when the band removed their facial disguises, suddenly passersby stopped and took in an impromptu concert that delighted the many.

Others have done something very similar. In 2007, Joshua Bell, a world renowned violinist, played to a sold out theatre to patrons in Boston who paid \$100 per seat. Two days later, he would be playing a \$3.5 million violin in a metro Washington DC station where he received \$32 in tips over a 30 minute period.

As people, we have a way of playing favourites. There are those that we like and we have reasons for liking them. And there are those we pass by and barely give the time of day to. And often, it's not because of level of skill or worth but by our own perceptions of value.

James writes to scattered Christians to deal with favouritism. It might seem strange that in a practical letter, this is on the top of his list. Yet it is. So why should we not play favourites?

Love your neighbour (vv. 1-4)

Verse 1 begins with the command: "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." We could put it more simply: "Do not hold faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ with favouritism." The word that we have for favouritism here comes from an expression "to receive the face." In other words, Christians should not receive people by mere appearances.

Research has been done, and even in a society that has been deeply influenced by the rule of equity that has come from the Christian faith, showing that those who dress in a certain style are more likely to be received than others. James will give an example of this in vv. 2-4 with minimal details. Two men come in to a gathering of Christians. One is in shabby clothing – literally in filthy clothes, using the same word as 1:21 where we are told to put away all filthiness – and another comes in wearing clothing showing that he is a person of influence and authority and power – a signet ring and shining clothes. The filthy man has to sit at the feet of others or stand in the corner while the prominent man gets a privileged position. We aren't told if this is a worship setting, a court setting, if these men are believers or not. But all we know is if they are known or not. That's not the point. Simply put, they are treated differently based on their appearances.

James conclusion is stated in v. 4 – if you do this, then have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? It would do us good to stop and think why

this is evil. Why is it wrong to make distinctions based off of appearances? We know that you can't judge a book by its cover, but as humans we do this all the time in subtle ways. We don't base it off of how people are dressed, but we can tell someone's social standing by how they do their hair, the way they groom themselves, the kind of speech they use and the way they talk, the posture in which they stand, and the types of activities they participate in and the places they vacation. We make judgments based off of subtle things, and we play favourites. James says this is evil.

The reason is evil for two reasons. First, the word that James uses when he says that we make distinctions (v. 4), he is using a word that has the same root as doubting in 1:6. In other words, to make a distinction is to be a double-minded person. And in this context, James is writing to a group of people who have been persecuted, fled, and are trying to curry the favour of the rich and powerful, presumably in hopes that they can minimize their persecution by treating the rich and powerful in a way that will benefit them. Yet James says in v. 6 that this is crazy – these are the very people that are persecuting you. Why would you be double-minded and try and secure their favour when they only cause you harm? This was Israel's history in the OT – they would face pressures from other nations, and the prophets (especially Isaiah) would condemn how their kings would secure the favour of nations and political alliances of those who only caused them harm. The prophets condemned this kind of thinking because it was not holding faith in their glorious Lord.

And verse 1 points us back to something powerful. Faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. This mention of Jesus's name is the second of two uses in the book. Here, James says that partiality is incompatible with faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. That word 'glory' should cause us to pause. In the New Testament, the idea of Jesus being the Lord of glory is connected to his resurrection (Lk. 24:26; Acts 22:11; 1 Cor. 2:8; 15:43). Jesus Christ, the one who humbled himself, who left glory, who was born in poverty, scandal, and shame, made himself nothing, to the point of obedience of death on a criminal's cross. But God exalted him and gave him the highest place. So if God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (something that James will quote in chapter 4:6), then why would we think that glory comes any other way?

The reason glory comes in humility is because God had commanded over and over in his law to love your neighbour as you love yourself. In the great OT chapter on what it means to love your neighbour – Leviticus 19 – the command to show no partiality comes only three verses before the command to love your neighbour (Lev. 19:15, 18). Loving our neighbour happens when we do not look at outward appearances, but act like our God who looks upon the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). So we should not play favourites because it is a failure to love. So the first reason we should not play favourites is that it is a failure to love our neighbour.

Love as God loves (vv. 5-7)

The second reason we should not play favourites is that we are to imitate our God and Saviour, and the way he loves is how we ought to love. James begins by appealing to his "beloved"

brothers – reminding them that they have been loved by God in the midst of persecution, hardship, and trials. He then gives two reasons why.

First, God loves without condition. He chooses the poor (v. 5) and calls them by his name (v. 7). Here, we have a great reminder of how God loves. James will make the case that playing favourites is to contradict God's attitude. God chooses people not on the basis of outward appearance, but upon his own sovereign choosing. The language here is the same kind of language that is used to describe how God chose Israel. Why did he choose Israel? Was it because she was a mighty nation, great in power? No – Deuteronomy 7:6-10 says that the Lord did not choose Israel because she was strong and mighty in number, but because he was gracious and compassionate.

God chooses those who are poor. And the word “poor” here should not just cause us to think of those who are materially poor, but also what Jesus taught – those who are poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3; Lk. 6:20). He sets his affection on people who are lowly and humble, willing to admit that they are sinners, and call them with an honourable name (v. 7).

This doesn't mean that people aren't responsible to respond to that call. The language of v. 5 says that the promise is for those who respond and “love him” – the same language used in 1:12. The one who is faithful in trial is the one who does not play favourites, but trusts in the Lord. These are the ones who will be not only called by his name, given his glorious name, but also given an inheritance as those who are royal members of the kingdom. Just as God chose Abraham and promised he and his descendants an inheritance – a land as their possession (Gen. 28:4; Deut. 1:8; 2:12), a kingdom for his people.

Second, we are to love as God loves because those who trust in their power blaspheme. Why would we curry the favour of those who hate God? Why would we want to be friends with the world? Isn't this being an enemy of God (Jas. 4:4)?

The church is to be a people who are characterized not by cliques and power politics but joyful fellowship of self-giving love. The church is meant to be the place where the distinctions of the world are overshadowed by our common allegiance to our king and our memory that the ground at the foot of the cross is level. We all come to God as sinners. We all come poor in spirit. We all come in need of forgiveness.

In the time of James, social standings were firmly entrenched. You couldn't climb the ladder of society. You couldn't work your way up from poverty. You were born into a social status and you stayed there. But what made the church so unique was that it was a society of radical equals. People were not chosen to be in leadership because of their money, influence, education, or status. They were chosen because of their godliness.

As a church in a suburb where we have tremendous blessings, we need to be very mindful that there are subtle ways that we can curry favour. We might not treat people based off of their

outward appearances, but we certainly find ways of evaluating others. What's their job? Where do they vacation? How do they hold themselves?

We don't need the help of powerful people to make a difference in this world. We have our glorious Lord. He humbled himself, came in the form of a servant, and became obedient to the point of death on a cross. But God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name. And one day, God will bless your poverty of spirit and give you the kingdom, your inheritance, and you will hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

We live in a world where people can pass by great talent in the subway because we are prone to evaluate people on the basis of factors that we have constructed as a society. Don't true musicians play in concert halls and stadiums?

But where did our Lord Jesus play? He came and played in the dusty streets of Israel, born and raised in a poor family, and he was a man who had no place to lay his head. So we must be that kind of society – a new society where we know that true power comes from the Lord of glory – the resurrected One.