

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Attitudes of Faith,
A Series on the Letter of James:
An Impartial Faith”
Proverbs 29:11-14
James 2:1-7**

**Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 23, 2018**

Proverbs 29:11-14

A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back. If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked. The poor man and the oppressor meet together; the Lord gives light to the eyes of both. If a king faithfully judges the poor, his throne will be established forever.

Introduction

We are continuing in our mini-series on the Letter of James. Last week we got a taste of who James was and of the theology he espouses in his epistle. We saw that for James, true and pure religion is one where faith is active both inside a person and outside. Internally, an active faith directs Christians to be doers of the word and not only hearers. An active faith also bridles the tongue, keeping a powerful and dangerous tool in check and directed toward holiness. Externally, an active faith moves Christians to not only pray for those who are afflicted or in need, but to actually do something about it. An active faith means we ought to be motivated to bring about positive change in our lives and in others' lives as well. Without faith actively changing us, we produce what James considers the sin of partiality. So without further ado...

James 2:1-7

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

"An Impartial Faith"

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

If you remember from last week, I mentioned that James has a very Jewish perspective. This makes sense if he is indeed the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem. A person like that would have to be steeped in Jewish culture and language. And this is made evident throughout the text of this Epistle. One of those evidences occurs in this word "partiality." Other translations may use "favoritism" or "respect of persons." Eugene Peterson uses "public opinion" in *The Message*, but I don't think that's what James is talking about. The Greek word used here is *prosopolépsia*, and it has a cumbersome history, so please bear with me for a moment. *Prosopolépsia* is actually a compound of two larger words: *prosopon lambanein*, which is a uniquely Jewish phrase. Here, again, we see James' Jewish background coming forth. For that

compound word is traced to the Jewish phrase *nasah panim*, which has the sense of regarding a person over another. In this case, favoritism and partiality are great English translations.

James' working definition of partiality, then, is this: regarding someone based on external circumstances at the neglect of someone else. Now, he does something interesting with this definition, for he adds "as you hold the faith." It's clear that the Apostle is pairing a prohibition on partiality with regards to faith. And his example makes sense. It's extremely inappropriate to regard and revere a wealthy person over and against a poor person when both enter the church. The church cannot be quick to admit and pamper and pander to a rich person but slow to add and respect a poor person. Thankfully, I don't see this happening in our congregation. I know y'all are quick to welcome any person who comes in. But I don't think James is limiting his prohibition on partiality to just church membership. Remember, for James, faith is not mere religion. Faith is a lifestyle and a worldview. If you were to ask him, "Is partiality okay outside of the faith?" I think James would answer yes and no. Yes, partiality is okay *outside* of the faith, but no, because faith is our *way of life*. The world may practice partiality, but true and pure religion is to "keep oneself unstained from the world."

Unfortunately, the sin of partiality creeps its way into the lives of even the most faithful of Christians. A witness of such partiality happened just past week. I don't normally like to share these negative experiences from the pulpit, I am doing so only to make clear my position and by way of personal example. At last week's DAWN board meeting I got overly impassioned against certain members' suggestion to limit services to young people from monthly help to quarterly help, while keeping unchanged the monthly help to senior citizens. I am not naive, I realize there are people out there who abuse the system and the generosity of not only DAWN, but of area churches as well. Those who do abuse our charity ought to be confronted, but to place a blanket prohibition on young people simply because they are young and viewed by older members as entitled is the definition of James' sin of partiality. Yes, they are entitled. Struggling young people and young families are just as entitled to sustenance as the elderly. While my tone at the DAWN board may have been unchristian—and for that I do apologize—I stand firm by my conviction that to limit food distribution to people under the age of 55 to quarterly is an egregious sin that James vehemently says the church ought not commit.

The reason why partiality is such an egregious sin in James' eyes is because to distinguish between persons is to make a judgment call. To say that all young people are not entitled to monthly food distribution simply because in one's eyes their youthfulness ought to mean they can provide for themselves is a judgment call that no one over the age of 40, today, can make. I am going to be 30 years old this October. Betsy and I are extremely blessed to have parents who instilled a healthy understanding of finances and established a healthy savings for their children. As financially stable millennials, Betsy and I are extremely rare. Which means even I am not in a position to judge my peers. I can't imagine the anxiety and impossibility of affording daily goods for a single mother of three or the young man trying to pay his rent, car loan, and insurance. For humans to make blanket judgments on other people is to play the role of God. Only he knows the history behind every individual's situation. Some may be self-inflicted, but others are more likely thrust into those situations or born into them. Regardless of the why and the how, I believe

it to be our duty, and DAWN's duty, not to draw sweeping distinctions when giving aid, and to address abuses as they arise.

In verse four, James asks a rhetorical question that should strike us to the core: By showing partiality, "have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" In James' particular example, one might be well-intentioned to welcome the rich man because he can add to the church's coffers. He likely has the means to support a mission trip, the time to chair a committee, and a community presence that'll highlight the congregation. With DAWN's example, those board members are well-intentioned to care for the elderly and are well-intentioned to prevent abuse by some clients and encourage self-reliance. All well-intentioned motives, but dripping with sin. No matter how good our intentions may be, when humans cast judgments, there is always a hint of evil. The one judging may have selfish thoughts. The one judged may have vengeful thoughts. The ones watching may have caustic thoughts. To some degree or another, sin's residue will cause our judgments, our partialities, to be wicked. That's the definition of total depravity! We are not 100% freed from sin's stain. Only God's judgments and distinctions are perfect, holy, and pure.

James asserts this truth when he reminds his beloved brothers, "has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom..." Some may choose to read this strictly as those who are financially impoverished. I try not to put limits on God or try to understand him through my limited means. Most importantly, I hope I've shown that James' view is never as narrow as the words he uses. When I see this, I think of Jesus' first of the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven." I say this because I know plenty of impoverished people who are openly sinful, arrogant beyond measure, cruel and wrathful. Sin makes no distinctions between class and race. I believe James is echoing Jesus and using Christ's words within the framework of his illustration. In *this* analogy, the poor man *is* an inheritor of the Kingdom, while the rich man is not. This is reflected in the grand scheme with the poor in spirit inheriting the kingdom, while the rich in flesh do not. The theology that James is espousing by using Jesus' words is the doctrine of election.

Has not God chosen, on this phrase turns the whole of James' argument. It is God whose distinctions and judgments are of the ultimate worth and in the final analysis are the most important. God's electing love, from our perspective, is blind. I mean this in the same way we assert that justice is blind. In the old city of Bern, Switzerland, you'll find the Fountain of Justice. Atop the pedestal is the blindfolded Lady Justice, with a sword in her right hand and scales in her left. Justice, when correctly administered, does not take into account a person's status, wealth, race, or ethic. From our perspective, God's election is this type of blind. God pays no attention to a person's color, bank account, family relations, or birthplace. However, God's election is not promiscuous. Some consider this doctrine cruel and unusual because they imagine God sitting on his throne damning and saving people willy-nilly and without cause. This couldn't be further from the truth! James, in a way, is telling us that only God has the right and ability to place distinctions between those within his church and those without. But even God's distinctions are not without order! God's electing love is reflected in our part. As James says, the promise of Kingdom inheritance goes to those who love God.

Those who are poor in spirit are chosen by God to be rich in his mercy and compassion and heavenly kingdom. Those poor in spirit, whom God makes rich in spirit, respond to this grace with a love of their own. In this way, the church is recognized by her love. *And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love / Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.* For James, this love is manifested in our faith, which is both active and impartial. When we are impartial, we do not lift up those who will harm us. An impartial faith is more likely to honor those who ought to be honored, those who, like us, are inheritors of the kingdom. Regardless of looks or station, impartiality recognizes only God's Spirit and his image written on our brethren. But, when we allow sin to flourish, when we continue to be influenced by the world and corrupted by iniquity, our lives take on partiality. We create dividing walls of hostility. We draw distinctions between our brothers. We take on the judge's robe that rightly belongs to God! And we, as James says, dishonor the poor in spirit, whom God has promised to inherit his kingdom. And at the same time we lift up those who oppress us and accuse us. Most often this plays out by our disrespecting and disenfranchising the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, while also honoring and establishing those who are wicked, lecherous, and deceitful.

The important thing to remember is we are not left unawares or stranded without guidance. While you and I cannot judge others, we can judge ourselves. You and God are the only people who have the capacity to examine your own life. This is both good and terrifying. It is good because no one can tell you if you are worthy of God's compassion or not. It is terrifying because God's judgment is final and eternal. But we have a hope. We have a hope because God gives us the formula by which he measures each person. And while we cannot use that formula on others, we can—and should—use it on ourselves. James makes mention of this formula in the final two verses of our passage.

He asks his audience to consider two rhetorical questions. “Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?” If you take note of the actions of the sinful rich, you'll notice two distinct verbs. The sinful oppress the righteous and they blaspheme the honorable name of God. Unsurprisingly, this looks very similar to another of Jesus' teachings. The greatest commandment that our Lord taught us is to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. If we are truly impartial and active in our faith, then we strive never to dishonor God nor oppress our neighbors. This is the rule by which every Christian must measure herself. While I and others around you may see the fruit of your heart, only you are in a position to discern where and how you adhere to the Double Love Rule. As Jesus told his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

Let us pray. Awesome and Omniscient God, you are our Judge and King; and your Word is final. You are compassionate and merciful to those who turn to you in repentance and faith. A broken and contrite heart is pleasing to you, O God. We ask that your Spirit guide us toward an impartial life. May our worldview be not judgmental—for that is not our right—but full of piety and charity. May the Double Love Rule, the summary of the two tables of the Law, may it be the rule by which we live every moment of every day. Not selfishly, but for the glory and honor of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen and amen.