

## **A FAITH THAT WORKS: No Partiality**

**James 2:1-10, 14-17**

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**WATCH/LISTEN:** [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-faith-that-works-no-partiality/](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-faith-that-works-no-partiality/)

I.

Professor and author Tony Cartledge told a story from his college years in the 1960s, the age of Woodstock and hippies. In his sophomore year, he became acquainted with an unwashed young man who hung around the campus and called himself "Link." Day in and day out, Link wore the same ragged jeans, T-shirt, and stained sweatband in his long, unruly black hair.

Link professed to be a Christian, so one Sunday evening, Tony invited him to attend church with him. As they strolled down the aisle, Tony could see some of the same people who had welcomed him as a clean-cut Baptist boy looking at Link as if he were from Mars. But, as Tony settled into a pew beside his bearded and sandal-clad friend, a little girl whispered excitedly on the row behind them, "Mommy, is that Jesus?"<sup>ii</sup>

Young children see things differently, often with more clarity and authenticity. They are innocent and curious, open and accepting.

In an adorable video created by the BBC's children's programming channel, CBeebies, children of multiple ethnicities and abilities were asked, "What makes you two different from each other?"

Their answers are utterly heartwarming. (<https://vimeo.com/288590683?share=copy>)

What a precious video! Most of the children in the video thought of things they enjoy and that others don't like as much as them. They might disagree on lettuce or tomato sauce. They might live up the hill or down the hill, have smaller toes, or never stop talking. They might have squirrels in the roof and some of them aren't good at dancing. What the children don't seem to mention are their physical differences, the sorts of differences that adults sometimes rely on for categorizing people—differences like race, ethnicity, looks, or physical abilities.

While the video might suggest that children are color-blind to differences, that's not entirely the case. Dr. Sally Palmer, with the Department of Psychology and Human Development at University College London, told the BBC that children see those differences but don't value them.

But somewhere, something changes.

Maybe it is on the playground when a kid is picked last for a sports team or in the middle school cafeteria when kids refuse to make room at their table for someone new or different. Maybe it is when advertisers persuade us that certain clothes and brands reflect value and status.

Perhaps it changes when we hear adults whisper about "those people" or our industries and systems stereotype different races or ethnicities as intelligent, rich, innocent, or thugs. Somewhere from childhood to adulthood, we learn to value others differently, whether due to our insecurities or fears or the influence of others. Somewhere along the years, differences we didn't value as children became highly valued differences that we allowed to define and divide us.

II.

Today's passage in James opens with these words: "My brothers and sisters, do not claim the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory while showing partiality." (v. 1)

Don't proclaim faith with your mouth and pronounce favoritism with your actions. In chapter two of this letter or sermon to Jewish believers, James gives an example of showing favoritism. He talks about two guests coming to church – one wealthy, with expensive jewelry and clothes, and the other poor, dressed in filthy clothes. The church members enthusiastically welcome the wealthy guests and give them the best seats in the sanctuary, while the poor are overlooked and made to stand in the back or hidden away.

James has no patience for this, warning his readers that if they treat the two people differently, they are showing favoritism, which is wrong and comes from evil thoughts.

James, like the prophets of old, confronts us with the painful truth of the difference between what God calls us to and our response, the distance between what we say and do. We may understand all the complexities of Christian doctrine, feel deeply convicted, follow all the rules, and take pride in knowing Scripture by heart, convincing ourselves that we're special in God's eyes. But if our faith in Christ doesn't move us to action, if our faith and love are only nouns and not verbs, if we are prejudice toward one person over another, we stand convicted by the very Gospel we profess. James writes in vv. 8-10, "You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself. But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law, you are exposed as a lawbreaker. Anyone who tries to keep all of the Law but fails at one point is guilty of failing to keep all of it." If we welcome and advocate for one group of people but discriminate against another, we violate the law of liberty.

James's example in the letter may have concerned the rich and poor. He is most certainly called out socio-economic discrimination among them. He was also addressing the broader issue in the early church of treating Jewish and Gentile believers differently, something we discussed at length in our August sermon series in Ephesians.

Like the culture around them, the early church struggled with favoritism and prejudice between cultures, traditions, wealth, and ways of living. The world around them worshipped the rich, gave privileges to the elite, and ignored the poor. But the people of the Way, the followers of Jesus, were to be a different kind of community. As salt and light in the world, they were to usher in a different kingdom where they reject any messages that employ dehumanizing

rhetoric or any limitations on the command to "love your neighbor" that Christ himself removed.

But this wasn't happening, and James called it out. Good thing we don't struggle with favoritism, partiality, and prejudice today in the church, right?

I think it is important that we develop a humble and honest way of letting the scriptures speak to us and assume that, like the community that James was writing to, we aren't perfect followers of Jesus, that we might also show favoritism, hold prejudices, and that we need help to be wise and loving to all.

What I am saying is that we might be a little bit partial to partiality, too. We don't always get it right. And sometimes, we're closer than we think.

III.

In my 35 years here, I've seen a lot of Sundays come and go, but there is one I will always cherish more than others. It was December 3, 2023. It was the first Sunday after this congregation began hosting Jefferson City Room at the Inn in our gym. JCRATI is a cold-weather shelter for those unhoused and needing a bed and warm meal during the year's coldest months. It was a big and brave "yes" by this congregation to host the shelter, and I had more than a few restless nights wondering how it would all work out – not just for our church but our guests.

The guests are to leave the shelter by 7:00 a.m. each morning. Our church service begins at 9:00 a.m., but our doors usually open by 8:00 a.m. That first Sunday after we opened the shelter, I arrived early. Several shelter guests I had met over the weekend were already in our lobby, sitting down, savoring a warm cup of coffee. Our maintenance workers and greeters had already welcomed them in from the cold.

On that first Sunday, as I welcomed everyone to worship from this platform, I looked out into the sanctuary to see nearly a dozen from the unhoused community seated throughout the sanctuary as we began to worship together. And, friends, I almost didn't make it through the welcome. It was the most beautiful and holy sight to me. Some worshippers dressed in suits, some in holy jeans. Some were freshly showered, and some were waiting for their weekly shower across the street. All are loved by God; all are equal in value because all are made in the image of God and declared worthy.

Hosting a shelter is faith in action, as is listening to stories different from ours, learning the complexities of an issue most of us know little about, and working together to find solutions that work toward the flourishing of all. But that kind of love in action doesn't come unless we get close.

## IV.

One of the most significant ways to fight against prejudice is proximity. A psychologist who spoke about the video we showed at the sermon's beginning believes that spending more time around people of different backgrounds, adults, and children can learn to overcome stereotypes and discrimination built by society.

Bryan Stevenson agrees. Stevenson founded and leads the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. In his book *Just Mercy*, he describes growing up poor in a racially segregated community in Delaware. The turning point came when his grandmother sat him down and said, "You can't understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close." He calls it the *power of proximity*. It changes us. You have to get close.

Partiality takes many forms today. Favoritism fuels injustice and prejudice, but children remind us that we once saw the world differently. Somewhere along the years, we learn partiality. But James says that as followers of Christ, we must unlearn it because there is no partiality in Christ. How do we begin to unlearn it? We watch and do what Jesus did. We watch who he ate and sat with, who he touched and embraced, who he got close to, and how he treated them, and we do the same. Jesus will lead us across every barrier to people we may have little in common with, but who God loves and whom we are to love.

We might disagree on lettuce or tomato sauce. Some of us might live up the hill or down the hill, have smaller toes, or never stop talking. Some of us have squirrels in the roof, literally and metaphorically, and some of us aren't good at dancing. But we are all loved by God, and we are to love one another in word but in action if we have a faith that is living and not dead.

When that little girl saw Tony's friend, Link, and whispered, "Mommy, is that Jesus?" I hope her mommy's response was, "Yes, dear." For Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." Jesus walks among us, most likely in the very people we refuse to get close to and among those we least expect.

We are a people formed by the story of a God who chose proximity over power, who, through Jesus Christ, got close, moved into the neighborhood, and dwelt among us. God calls us to do the same, to get close, especially with the poor, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is how the kingdom of God will come near, a kingdom for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> Cartledge, T. W. (2024). *Nurturing Faith Commentary, year B, volume 4: Lectionary resource for preaching and teaching: Lent-Easter-Pentecost*. Nurturing Faith, 92.