

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: James 2:1-9

Sermon Title: "Not Giving, and Not Looking for, Any Partiality"

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Show no partiality. This is a theme that occurs again and again throughout Scripture. "Do not look only at the outwardly appearance of somebody, but see what is in the person's heart just as the Lord does."¹ "If you love those who love you, what credit is it to you? Even sinners do this. Love and do good to everybody."² "Who was the neighbor to the one who fell among thieves? The one who showed mercy on him. Go and do likewise."³ James comes right out with it in verse 9: "If you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors." The theme arises time and time again: Our neighbor is everybody. We cannot give honor to the one who looks good, who talks well. Even the person who hardly has two pennies to rub together should receive just as much attention and respect as anybody else.

But what is good for the goose is good for the gander. As much as we may fall in the trap of showing

¹ Cf. 1 Samuel 16:7.

² Cf. Luke 6:32-35.

³ Cf. Luke 10:36-37.

partiality toward certain people, we easily fall in the trap of wanting people to show partiality toward us. Others too could judge us by the way we act or dress or look, and we might not find favor in their eyes. We want them to pay attention to us, to respect us, and so we might take certain lengths to get noticed.

I was listening to a podcast, as I usually do, about the ways that people express themselves on Facebook. On Facebook you can upload a photo that will serve as your profile picture. Most of the time, the profile picture is just of your face, so that people might recognize you by your image as well as by your name. Some people might just upload a cartoon character, or an animal, or something else. But the man on the podcast was saying that some people are very picky about their photos, and they want to express themselves in the best light. So they might pose like a supermodel, so that friends will comment on how beautiful they look. They pucker their lips, lift their chins, look to the side, and do not smile, so they can look as alluring as possible. Or the person will pose with his shirt off, and flex muscles in the mirror as he takes the shot. He thinks his friends will be impressed with how manly he can look. Some people upload pictures of themselves when they were 10 or 15 years younger. They think they look too old today, so they

find a picture of when they were in their 20s, although now they are in their 50s.

There is a desire to have people notice us. People want the right sort of partiality shown toward them, so they do what it takes to be noticed, not to turn people off toward them.

Why do people do this? Why do they preen themselves and lift weights and do whatever it takes for others to show favorable partiality? Maybe because they think they can get somewhere by what they do. Maybe if they put out a certain image, if they talk a certain way and act a certain way in order to look attractive to others, maybe they can receive something that they didn't have before. In our *American Idol*, reality-television world, it seems that anybody can be noticed and become a celebrity with instant money and fame. The right connections might get us somewhere, and change our lives forever.

Apparently there were well-to-do people in James's world. They were marked by the gold rings they wore on their fingers, and the fine clothing that covered their bodies. It was not a normal custom to wear rings on fingers during James's time. It was considered a true luxury to own one ring for one finger. Nowadays we could visit WalMart or Jerrod's to purchase a ring

of any value. But during James's time, you had to have real money to wear rings or fine garments.

So these people were easily marked. They could be seen a mile a way. Those who saw them could make the choice of treating them like anybody else, or of giving them extra attention so they might do something for them. They could give the wealthier person the best seat in the house: "Here, take this seat. It's nice and comfy."⁴ They could make positive comments about them: "I sure do love that ring you are wearing. How much did it set you back?" They could pander to these people, make them feel special, and then those ring-wearing people might give them something in return. Who knows, maybe a health donation to the church budget? Maybe an invitation to a grand party, where a person can network and make business connections? Maybe the wealthier person would come by more often, and just make everybody else look good around him or her.

Trying to make connections with people who seem to have it all may be a dangerous thing. Whether the person is wealthy or just knows how to have a good time or seems to have all the guys and girls hanging around, trying to get something from that person is a dangerous undertaking. We become slaves to that

⁴ Cf. James 2:3.

person, because he or she will not pay attention to us, unless we look cool in his or her eyes. We have to do what he or she wants us to do in order to keep him or her around. So, in essence, we become a slave to that person's whims. We cannot think on our own. We cannot be the people God wants us to be.

With that, we become slaves to the demands of popularity. We become slaves to the need to be attractive, and people go to extremes with their faces and bodies to keep looking attractive. We become slaves to keep up some appearance that we have it all, when in fact we do not.

It is not our job to be noticed by others. That is not the reason for our existence. The One whom we desire to notice us is God. God notices us when we serve others. We get God's attention straight away, when we reach out to somebody who needs a helping hand.

The best seat in the house may belong to anybody. It might go to the poorest person in the room, not exclusively to the one who does well for himself. It might go to a stranger as well as a friend. It could go to somebody we normally do not notice, because the person is too young or old. Giving somebody the best seat has nothing to do with their social status or their

level of education or their outwardly appearance. Show no partiality, James says. We offer the best for anybody who needs it, and God will notice. God gives us every blessing to share with another person. God gives us what the other person needs in the hour of need.

I was visiting a member of the church in the hospital, and he wasn't in his room. The nurse at the nursing station said that he went downstairs for MRI tests, and that could take who knows how long. To my left were two women dressed in burgundy uniforms. They were cleaning ladies who happened to be standing next to me. They asked if I was a pastor, and I said I was, but not of the hospital. They asked if I could follow them down the hallway. Once in a blue moon, somebody I don't know, usually a patient, will ask me to talk with him, because he doesn't have a pastor coming to visit. I am glad to oblige when asked. So, I thought these women knew of a patient who needed to speak with a pastor, and I discovered that the women themselves needed a pastor. They were the ones have troubles with life, and they needed some counseling and prayer. I have never visited a hospital, in which I prayed with staff members. I didn't come to the hospital to visit them, but a member of the church. So what? The "best seat," so to speak, belongs to a

member or a cleaning lady, whoever needs it the most. I might not have gotten anything from speaking with these women, but what they received was a new hope, a new vision on life.

James says to the Christians to whom he wrote: “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him?”⁵ The Christian message is very attractive to those who are poor. It is the common people who embraced everything that Christ had to say, and they were the ones who followed him, wanting to receive more. The socio-economic situation of their world was not solving any of their problems. They were still miserable and tired of being underprivileged, treated as something less than human. When you have nothing, you are open to receive something. Christ’s message was shared with them, free of charge; and that message gave them new life.

This is not to say that anybody else cannot hear the message and be made new. The door is not shut on those who would be considered rich or better-off-than-others. The problem is that those who have stuff tend to focus more on their stuff than on God. Those

⁵ James 2:5.

who try hard to impress others tend to have little time to serve God. They too need to get to the point, in which they realize the stuff is not going to last. It isn't going to save them. Nobody can save them, expect for Christ. When they let go of the stuff, their hand become empty, so they may receive God's blessings. When they refuse the need to impress others – to try and be attractive for others – they may see the face of God, and know they are special in his sight. They receive life, and have opportunity to share life with others.

In God's sight, there is no partiality. There is no distinction. The Lord has made them all: rich and poor, white and black, male and female, young and old, North American and African and Asian and European and South American. We all need something from somebody else, and we all have something to give to somebody else.

In God's sight, we are all children. We are children who are poor with sin, sick and sad with suffering, needing a Doctor to heal us, needing a Savior to rescue us. God gives his blessings to all, hoping all will receive them. There is nothing we can do to get God to bless us. God freely does, and by his grace and love all of us are made whole.