

Have you ever been unfairly or unjustly treated by others? You don't think you did anything wrong but it was just because you were different from them. If you are the first generation of immigrant parents, you may understand what I am saying. If you are much shorter or taller than the average person, you may have been teased or even bullied. I still remember when I was a child, there was a girl in our community. She was a pretty and nice girl, but because she was a little overweight, boys called her "radish legs" "radish legs", which was a negative Korean term that children would use. I don't think the boys wanted to harm her, but she ended her life. What did she do wrong to cost her life?

Prejudice and hatred are not new in world history. It was prominent in Jesus' day and it continues in our day as well. Not too long ago, millions of Jews were killed by the hands of the Nazi's who hated them simply because of their religious affiliation. In the darker days of our nation, Africans were brought to America and sold into slavery as a piece of property. We cannot deny the racial prejudice that remains in America, not only for African-Americans, but those of any other nationality apart from European descent – Hispanics, Asians, or Arabs. Racism is still very much alive. Besides the skin colors, the difference of language, physical appearance, economic levels, political views, education backgrounds or personal opinions may also cause a lot of prejudice.

While all of this hatred and prejudice may be common this day, it is certainly not pleasing unto the Lord. What does the Scripture say about prejudice or favoritism? Let's read what James says about it. [Read James 2:1-13]

As Christians, how shall we treat other people when they are different from us? In our text, James begins with a command, "*My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism*" (v.1). The Greek word (προσωπολημψία, *prosōpolēmpsia*) for "favoritism" or "partiality" comes from two words—"to receive" and "a face." It literally means "receiving or accepting the face." A face is just a part of us. We have more than a face, don't we? We have a body; we have minds; we have thoughts; we have dignity, and we are spiritual. But, favoritism is just accepting a person by his/her appearance without considering who he/she really is. James is saying that favoritism is not what believers are supposed to show. If we understand who we are and how we become believers, we are not to show any favoritism.

Jesus is the Lord who owns us. He is the object of our faith, and also he is the one who gives us faith. We are able to believe in him because he called us by name. Only those who answered Jesus' call are able to have faith in him. Jesus is the glory. He is our glorious Lord, which can be translated as "the Lord of glory." Why is the notion of glory important? After receiving the Ten Commandments, Moses found out that people made a golden calf. Because of their sin, many people died and they were not able to enter the Promised Land. In his need for encouragement, Moses prayed to God, "*Now show me your glory*" (Exodus 33:18). The LORD replied, "*I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence*" (Exodus 33:19). And He did just as He said. The LORD came down in the cloud and passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious*

God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). There was the glory of God. By his presence, the LORD showed not only who he is but also what he is. This is exactly what Jesus showed to us. Jesus is God Himself. He came to us in all his goodness and in the full revelation of his Person. *“The Word [Jesus] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).* Jesus is the Lord of glory in whom we have faith. We seek God’s glory, but when we show favoritism, there will be no glory because God is not there. As the children of God who experienced His glory, we should not show favoritism to anyone.

James gives us a practical illustration about favoritism. Two guests are coming to a synagogue, which is the church this day. One is a wealthy person wearing a gold ring and fine clothes. The other guest is a poor man in dirty and shabby clothes. Both of them are unfamiliar with the assembly, so they need to be guided. The problem is when an usher treats them differently. If the usher takes a rich man to a fine seat while the poor person is forced to stand or to sit at the feet of him, he is showing favoritism. James implies that he is guilty of being an evil judge. You cannot say, “No, I never ushered in the church”, because the usher represents all believers who show favoritism. But, why is it evil? We can see at least two reasons why favoritism is evil.

First, it is inconsistent with God’s way of working. In James’ time, the church was predominantly poor and deprived. And, the church was under a great persecution. Therefore, if a rich man was coming to the church, it was a big deal for them because the rich man most likely had some connection with Roman authority who could release some of their children or siblings from prison. They could expect something from the rich man. We are not in persecution, but we can easily relate our church to that situation. Let say we have two guests. One comes with his children and seems to be ready to serve our church, and the other seems to be looking for help from the church. We may be tempted to treat them differently. We may say “it is for the church’s sake”, but James says “No, it is your evil thought.” God chose us in his grace, not based on anything about who we are, what we have, or what we will have. If we show favoritism to people with an expectation of receiving something back, that is an evil thought because it is from our selfish desire.

In verses 6-7, James makes his point by asking a series of three questions. Who is exploiting you? Who is dragging you into court? And, who is blaspheming the name of the Lord? The answer to all three questions is the same; it is the unbelieving rich. The rich at that time were actually those who persecuted believers. They were not coming to worship God, but to persecute and misguide believers. We may expect something by showing favoritism but it doesn’t do anything good for us. It is evil that causes us to sin more.

Another reason that favoritism is evil is because it is sin. We live in a society where everything is changing. This is not the world we expected 20 or even 5 years ago. It has changed so much and quickly that we cannot recognize it anymore. And, the change has not been so positive. There seem to be more corruption in the society year after year. About 1 year ago, a 21-year-old young man walked in, sat down in a Bible study group and killed nine people including the pastor. Later he confessed with a laugh, “I did!”¹ Why? Because they were all black. You probably

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/09/us/dylann-roof-trial-charleston-video/index.html>

remember what happened a couple weeks ago in Charlottesville, VA. Racism has always been with us and it is still alive. Racism and all kinds of favoritism are sin because they break the royal law found in Scripture, *“Love your neighbor as yourself”* (v.8). Favoritism arises because we think we have more and we are better than others. It arises out of our selfishness. Favoritism is a sin because it is totally opposite of Jesus’ teaching. What is even sadder is that favoritism including racism is also alive and well in the church.

So, as Christians, how shall we overcome favoritism which arises from our sinful nature? We need to realize that we will be also judged by the law. *“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom”* (v.12). The law that frees us is the gospel of Jesus. *“Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death”* (Romans 8:2). We have freedom since Christ has set us free (cf. Galatians 5:1a). However, this freedom doesn’t allow us to discriminate against others just because they are different. If we do, it is like going back to be slaves of sin and death. Then, we will be judged for our sins. We are under the law of Christ. We need to speak and act accordingly, without showing favoritism toward others.

We also need to remember the mercy we have received, *“because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful”* (v.13a). The judgement for believers is not to lose their salvation. Christians are not going to experience God’s wrath, but if we show favoritism, we may suffer a loss of reward in heaven. If we are not merciful toward others, we may need to answer to Jesus in heaven. We don’t want to lose more valuable things just to satisfy our momentary sinful desires in this world. If we truly understand how merciful Jesus was to us, I don’t think we can be merciless toward others.

Mercy is not receiving what we deserve. We are supposed to receive eternal punishment, but because of God’s mercy, we are not going to be punished. We are forgiven. When the law condemns us, mercy gives us a way out. When the law judges us with all of our sins, faults or crimes, the merciful Jesus declares “Not guilty!” Mercy pardoned us; mercy freed us. How can we now judge or condemn others after experiencing this mercy? We should be merciful as Jesus was to us since *“mercy triumphs over judgment!”* (v.13b)

I don’t think anyone can be exempted from favoritism since it is a part of our nature. I am sure in your life you had experienced unfair treatments by someone else. Probably, all of us have shown favoritism whether intentionally or unintentionally. James, who grew up with Jesus, the perfect brother, had so much to tell us. He teaches us to remember the law of Christ and the mercy that we have received. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice and mercy, we should treat others with His love. We are all different because that is how we are created. If we are trying to figure out what differences we have and who is right or wrong, there will be no ending. There will be only prejudice and favoritism among us. Instead, we need to find out what we have in common and come together. *“There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all”* (Ephesians 4:4-6). The Lord of Glory is more than enough for us to come and worship together. Because of his mercy, we can even thank God for the differences we have in this body. We can encourage and accept one another for who they are. We will make

every effort to keep the unity and peace in this church. And we will spread this unity and peace to the community until we meet our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.