

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

The week of August 20 I am going to be leading a morning Bible study in Ocean Park, Maine where I spent my summers growing up. They have invited me to do this for many years now. One of my favorite stories about doing Bible Study in Ocean Park happened eight years ago. I was there to lead Bible study the first full week of July. I didn't have time to make copies of the worksheets for the study before I left Brewster so I figured I'd just have them copied in the Ocean Park Association office. On the afternoon of Friday, July 1, I walked into the Ocean Park office in shorts and a sweaty t-shirt. I hadn't bothered to shave that morning. The secretary in the office was chatting socially with a man standing in the doorway. I walked up behind him and stood there holding a manila folder in my hand that held the worksheets I wanted to copy. The woman looked at me briefly and proceeded to ignore me. Meanwhile my dad and my sons Nathan, and Greg were waiting for me outside in the car. I continued to stand there as the secretary and her friend chatted and gossiped about all sorts of trivial things. As the minutes began to roll by I started to get irritated. I was thinking, *"If I was clean shaven and wearing a suit and tie, she would have helped me already."* So I stood there looking at the secretary. She finally got the message, looked past her friend with annoyance written all over her face and said, *"Can I help you?"* I looked her right in the eyes and said, *"Hello, I'm Dr. Douglas Scalise and I'm here to lead the Bible Study this coming week and I was just wondering if you could make a few copies for me."* All of a sudden I was treated in a totally different fashion.

Listen to the words of James:

"My brothers and sisters, do you with **your acts of favoritism** really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, *"Have a seat here, please,"* while to the one who is poor you say, *"Stand there,"* or, *"Sit at my feet,"* 4 **have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?** 5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor.

Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7

Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* 9 **But if you show partiality, you commit sin** and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 11 For the one who said, *“You shall not commit adultery,”* also said, *“You shall not murder.”* Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13 **For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”**

In the summer of 1993 when Nathan was born we lived outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was leading a Bible study on the book of James at Prospect Hill Baptist Church where I was the pastor and I had a memorable experience that remains vivid to me 14 years later. The week we studied this scripture, Randall Cunningham, the fine quarterback of the Philadelphia Eagles football team, got married. It was big local news with lots of detailed coverage including the fact that the wedding cake cost \$18,000. Now this is back in 1993 when \$18,000 was \$18,000. Folks in the Bible study group sat in judgment of Randall Cunningham for his conspicuous consumption. People from our blue collar congregation talked about how that money could have been used much more constructively. We did what James says not to do and made distinctions among ourselves and became judges with evil thoughts. Then someone in the group spoke up said that Cunningham was a Christian who tithed to his church, a claim many Christians cannot make. In fact, the person went on, Cunningham had recently given his church \$1.5 million dollars so his church could build a gym in memory of his teammate Jerome Brown, a terrific defensive lineman who died in an automobile accident. The group got very quiet after that until someone made a remark about what they would give if they made millions of dollars a year and a woman responded that if we can't return a tithe to God with what we make now, there probably isn't any reason to think we'd readily give several thousand dollars a week to the church. Someone else chimed in good naturedly that they'd love to have some athletes like Randall Cunningham at our church. However, it was pointed out that would make us guilty of what James was talking about – showing partiality to someone because of his wealth and what he could do for the church financially. I concluded by saying this would not be fair to the poor or to the rich because it means we're showing favoritism and partiality valuing a person only in terms of what he or she can do for me or my organization, rather than seeing them as a sister or

brother in Christ whose value comes from God. It was a Bible study in which the scripture became just so vividly alive in our midst I never forgot it.

Why does James oppose favoritism? Favoritism is a reflection of our selfish, sinful nature; and not the nature of Jesus. It is a part of our selves that still regards people from merely a human point of view. Paul says in 2 Corinthians that once we are truly in Jesus we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. We no longer see people in terms of what they can do for us because of their wealth, their personality, their sexuality, or their power or anything else. James says, when we truly have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus, favoritism will cease to be part of our standard operating procedure. If we love only those who love us, if we only show compassion and interest with people we find fulfilling then we are not fulfilling our faith.

It's been said that *"Only God is in a position to look down on anyone."* Jesus reminds us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:45) that God *"makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."* God sent the Son because God so loved the WORLD. Jesus did not play favorites. In Matthew 22:16, the followers of those who opposed Jesus (the Pharisees and the Herodians) described Jesus' attitude toward people this way, *"Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, **and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.**"* They may not have believed what they said, but what they said was true.

Jesus was able to regard people without partiality because rather than trying to get something from people for his benefit; Jesus sought to draw out the best in people for God and for their own good.

We will show partiality if we are constantly relating to other people in terms of what we can get from them. We show favoritism to those we want something from in a positive way; such as being nice to people with money because we think they can help us financially, assist us in getting a job or improve our prestige. We may treat someone we're attracted to, our boss, or someone we want to be with friends with in a similar way. We can show partiality or favoritism by putting down those who are poor or of another race or nationality or religion or those who think differently than we do so we can feel better about ourselves.

For many people our view of others is shaped more by favoritism and judgment than by impartiality and mercy. Peter, one of the first disciples who is often presented as the example for us to learn from, had to learn a new attitude of impartiality and mercy

rather than favoritism and judgment. In Acts 10, Peter was up on a roof praying. He fell into a trance and he had a vision of something like a big picnic blanket spread out with all kinds of creatures and a voice said, “*Get up, Peter, kill and eat.*” But Peter says, “*No way, Lord, I’ve never eaten anything profane or unclean.*” Three times Peter is told not to call profane what God has made clean. Then Peter, the faithful, dedicated Jewish fisherman, is told to visit the home of a Gentile, a foreign soldier named Cornelius who is waiting with all of his household to hear what God has to say. Peter tells them all, “***I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God.***”

God shows no partiality, but James says human beings too often make distinctions between different kinds of people and become “*judges with evil thoughts.*” One advice column had a letter from a grocery store check out clerk who wrote in to complain about a woman who used food stamps to buy a \$17.00 cake. The clerk had some choice comments about “*lazy and wasteful*” people like her who buy things with food stamps that the clerk judged were inappropriate. Letters came in response to the check out clerk from all over the United States. There was a letter from a hard working couples making minimum wage who would go hungry the last two weeks of the month without food stamps; and another from a grandmother on welfare who bought a box of cookies for her visiting grandchildren and was treated roughly by a check out clerk.

The final response was from the woman who had purchased the \$17.00 cake. She wrote, “*I am the woman who bought the \$17.00 cake and paid for it with food stamps. I thought the check out woman at the store would burn a hole through me with her eyes. What she didn’t know (and I would never tell her) is that the cake is for my little girl’s birthday. It will be her last. She has bone cancer and will probably be gone within six to eight months. Let this be a lesson to those who sit in judgment of others without knowing all the facts.*”¹

James says the irony is that we treat the poor with disdain and the rich with esteem even though it is the rich who are more likely to oppress and exploit others for their own gain. You can hear people on talk radio go wild over someone who cheats on welfare or buys a cake on food stamps yet corporations that get fat at tax payers expense in return for shoddy work, substandard materials, and corruption seem to get a free pass when what they’re stealing is in the millions of dollars or more. Where’s the outrage over situations like the Big Dig in Boston or in the management of the war in Iraq

¹ Ann Landers column in The Philadelphia Inquirer, May 31, 1993.

in which billions are wasted and squandered while drivers in Boston wonder if tunnels are safe and service men and women have to raise their own funds to buy body armor and more heavily armored vehicles? A 19 year old kid convicting of robbing a convenience store of \$100 will end up with a harsher sentence in a real jail than a high ranking politician who has betrayed the public trust or a CEO who is guilty of defrauding thousands of people of millions of dollars in investments or pensions.

The truth is we favor and value rich people more than poor people. People slavishly follow the fortunes and misfortunes of the rich and famous. Many people are envious of the wealthy. They eagerly digest stories of people who have become rich and most of us wish we were wealthier than we all ready are. If a young man came to us and said he wanted to be a millionaire before he was 35 we would praise his ambition. If a young woman came and said she wished to sell everything she had and give it to the poor, we'd tell her to wise up and get that foolish idea out of her head. Yet that is basically what Jesus, Saint Francis of Assisi, and even Buddha did. Today their parents would be appearing on the Oprah Winfrey Show talking about their nutty kids who don't know what life is really all about.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:9, *"You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich."*

The question James is urging us to consider is, how do I keep the royal law found in scripture, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* We begin by remembering that when we show partiality to another person in the church or in society we are committing sin and breaking the law of God. When we discriminate against another person because of their bank account or their lack of a bank account, their appearance, their accent, their name, their skin color, their nationality, their religion – James says we are making distinctions among ourselves and becoming judges with evil thoughts.

Verse 13 is both the scariest and most hopeful verse in the passage. **"For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment."** The frightening part is knowing that judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy. We are not off the hook if we showed mercy a couple of times. Our daily attitude needs to bend toward mercy rather than judgment. Like the check out clerk I mentioned earlier, it is easy for the demon of judgmentalism and negativity to confirm our beliefs about "those" people. One Christian writer observed,

“Always try to understand WHY people say and do the things they do, the inner anguish that gives rise to those things, and then it will not be hard” to be merciful.

Pastor Mark Labberton in his book, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice* (Zondervan, 2007), writes, “According to Scripture, the very heart of how we show and distinguish true worship from false worship is apparent in how we respond to the poor, the oppressed, the neglected and the forgotten. As of now, I do not see this theme troubling the waters of worship in the American church. But justice and mercy are not add-ons to worship, nor are they the consequences of worship. Justice and mercy are intrinsic to God and therefore intrinsic to the worship of God. Our worship should lead us to greater mercy, to costly acts of justice, for those who are the least seen, the least remembered, the least desired.”

Jimmy Carter shared the following story about loving our neighbor. *“After a personal witnessing experience with Eloy Cruz, an admirable Cuban pastor who had a surprising rapport with very poor immigrants from Puerto Rico, I asked him the secret of his success. He was modest and embarrassed, but he finally said, ‘Senor Jimmy, we only need to have two loves in our lives: for God, and for the person who happens to be in front of us at any time.’ That simple yet profound theology has been a great help to me in understanding the Scriptures. In essence, the whole Bible is an explanation of these two loves.”²*

James 4:11-12

“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?”

James 2:14-17

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

² Jimmy Carter, *Sources of Strength*, page xix.