

Showing Partiality

James 2:1-9

1 My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? 6 But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? 8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. (James 2:1-9 (NIV))

In this modern era that we live in, there is a subtle "molding" process taking place within our minds and souls, without most of us even realizing that it is happening, a structuring of our thought processes that conveniently separates out those things that are "spiritual" from all the "other matters" of daily life. And unfortunately, many, perhaps most, of us Christians, have naively bought in to that concept. Without realizing that we are doing it, our thoughts separate out those things that we deem "spiritual", those things that we learn and do in church, those things that are "of Christ", from all the other things of our day, the things that we call "real life" or "reality". And as some have been heard to say, "that's church, and this is just business".

And such behavior is not at all what God intends for you and me. God wants you and me to recognize, accept and treat everything that takes place, whether within the church setting or outside of it, as being "Spiritual". In other words, God wants us to know that He really is personally and intimately involved within every circumstance and occurrence that takes place.

And the "Spiritual instructions" that we receive from these scriptures are not just options that we might consider as a help to us. They are mandates, mandates that require us to take this righteousness that Christ has spread abroad in our hearts and apply it in every circumstance. Yes, beginning first within the church setting with our fellow believers, but then also with strangers who come into our church, and then on out into every secular setting of daily life.

But listen! We are never to allow the opposite to take place. We must never allow secular beliefs, the teachings of the “natural man” to come into the church. Never! Because all things really are “spiritual”. And when we allow the secular beliefs and the teachings of “the natural man” to come into our church practices, they will surely corrupt everything they touch.

Listen to what God tells us about “Spiritual” things and “natural” things in 1 Corinthians 2,

12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. 13 And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. 14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

(1 Corinthians 2:12-14 (ESV))

As we read these words, and then read the words of our text here in James 2, and, if we are truly as James addresses us here in verse 1, fellow brothers who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, then we really should be as 2 Timothy 3 tells us, “taught, rebuked, corrected and trained in the ways of righteousness” by these words that we are reading here.

Again, please understand, everything that takes place in our daily lives and all of our “knee-jerk” responses to those things, are all very “spiritual” in context. And you and I ought to be prepared and never caught off-guard as we are confronted, without notice, with one of those circumstances of life, one like that which James speaks about here.

The question then . . . are you, am I prepared, or will we be caught off-guard? I want to face us with that question because too often when we read words of instructions such as these before us today, we really do not quickly apply them to ourselves and to our personal behavior. Yes, we see the need in other people, but we really are so naturally “defensive” of our own behavior that we just don’t really see ourselves as being the one that God is talking about when He tells us things like these here in our text, the treating of one man or woman better or worse, solely based upon our opinion about them, their status in life, or perhaps their color, or their nationality.

Some of you will recall recently when a man and his children came into the church during our Sunday School class time. I don’t know what went through the minds of the other one’s of you who were present, but I do know what went through my own mind.

First, I had a touch of irritation because the Sunday School class was being interrupted. Thankfully, I quickly realized that that response was wrong and I instead went on to a next response, but one that was even worse than the first.

I quickly sized the man up, remembered that he had been by our church on another occasion, asking for financial help. And by his clothing, scruffy appearance and demeanor, my thoughts went to this man being a “panhandler”, looking for a handout.

Did you notice in the words that I just said, that there was no “compassion”, no “kindness”, and no “love” within my assessment of this man and his family, no Godly “spiritual” thoughts, only the thoughts of a “natural man”, a “secular” evaluation of a stranger who was standing in front of me. And simply put, first impressions, while they may be accurate, do not often reflect the desires and purposes of God.

But thankfully, I did quickly address the man to determine his reason for coming in, because it seemed obvious that he was not here to attend our Sunday School class. But again, my response was not a “welcoming” response. I was just quickly “taking care of business”.

Thankfully, the whole matter didn’t turn out quite as badly as it may sound from these words. The Holy Spirit was eventually able to wedge His way into my mind and to bring some manner of “Christian response” to my otherwise “natural” behavior. And over the remaining few minutes that the man and his family were with us, I was able to show a “reasonably good” Christian response, not a “best response”, as I have later wished so much had of taken place. But at least I did not shame the Lord completely with my handling of the matter.

As I went outside with the man, I saw in his truck that he had other members of his family, a wife, a baby and two other small children. He didn’t seem to want to unload them and to come into the church. So, I concluded that it would probably be best for him and his family if I simply gave him the money he was hoping to receive and to let him go on his way.

And yes, thankfully, I did give him some words of the gospel to take with him and his family. And we prayed, and he went on his way.

But again, as I read these words before us here in James 2, I was probably well onto the “worst case” example of the instruction that God has for us here. Yes, I eventually did some of the “right things” with this man and his family, but barely so. And if I were to measure my Christian response on a scale of 1 to 10, I would be generous to give

myself more than a 2 or a 3. And even then, it was solely because of some quick intervention by the Holy Spirit.

So, what happens during those circumstances when we don't respond as we know that we should? One of the answers is simply that "we are caught off-guard". I was "caught off-guard". And folks, we should never be "caught off-guard". We should always remember that God is sovereign. And as our loving Father, He is ever and always orchestrating circumstances that will "train each of us up in the ways of righteousness". And, just as they should, these words and that circumstance are doing that with me. It is as the words of 2 Timothy 3 tell us, God is always "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training us in the ways of righteousness".

So then, as I look back on that incident and at my response, and also at the way God has since worked in my conscience convicting me that I should have done better, the next time, I really do want to be prepared and not caught "off-guard". I want to say the right things and do the right things. And I especially don't want to "judge" that person that God sends our way, thinking less of him because of his life circumstances.

This circumstance here in James 2, gives us a picture of the whole contrast, how we do so often quickly "judge" a poor and needy person and treat them in a condescending way, while we, on the other hand, freely welcome someone we know to be wealthy and up-standing in the community.

In this example given in these words of James, we have a regular "church setting". Everything should be in place to do exactly the right thing. It is not as if some homeless man has unexpectedly knocked on your door at home or perhaps at your office. This is the church! And we have all the instructions we need right within the pages of this book, "God-breathed words" that are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that you and I, the men and women of God, can be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV))

So then, may I ask you, would it not be the right thing for us to do to prepare ourselves for the next similar kind of encounter that will take place, perhaps, make a plan for who will be the first ones to speak to the person. Should more than one of us go to him and "welcome him", in at least the same way that we would welcome a wealthy and upstanding person?

Should some of you get up and offer him and his family some coffee and cookies from the kitchen? Should we always have some emergency money available if they need it?

And if he and his family need a place to sleep for a night, do we dare consider taking them into our home for the night. Or at least, do we know of a local ministry that might be able to help, and if not, should we begin trying to find out about one?

Another question . . . have there been needs within our own membership that we have not been willing to step forward and meet. We are a small congregation and not a lot of money, but should the church allocate a portion of its money towards taking care of the needy within our own membership, if such a need arises. Should you personally, be willing to give extra from your own income so that our church can be prepared to help some of our folks when they need it.

I am not personally aware of any such need at the moment, but should we not be prepared and not “caught off-guard” when the need does arise?

There are several things that God is teaching us in this passage. Some of it is as we have just said, that there are needs that should be met, both within our congregation and outside of it, and that we should be prepared to meet those needs? But more importantly, we must not allow our hearts and minds to be caught up in having and displaying a “judgmental spirit”. Judging others, in the manner that God describes here, is sinful, and is always displeasing to God. And there is a clear warning that is ever before us, that we will surely “reap whatever we sow”. If we sow the seeds of a judgemental spirit, we will surely reap a harvest of that same “judgmental” behavior back at us at some time in the future.

If a person is poor, they have reasons for being that way. Yes, sometimes those reasons come from wrong choices on their part. But notice that God does not speak about that here, and He does not give you and me the privilege or responsibility of being the judge of someone else’s character.

The “truth” is right in front of us, and we are without excuse. We are to obey the “royal law” and to “love our neighbor as ourselves”. And the next time that God orchestrates an opportunity for us, we need to be ready to respond in a manner that He will be able to say to us, “well done, my good and faithful servant”.

Listen to these words in 1st John as we close,

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:16-18 (NIV))