

The Subtlety Of Partiality

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)

A question as we begin our consideration of these precious words of scripture . . .
"Could it be said of you, that you are a person of discerning sensibilities?" "Discerning sensibilities"! Do not those words "discerning sensibilities" have a gentle, even sophisticated, sound to them?

I have found that our language has many such "subtle" expressions within it. Words that can really seem and sound harmless, even complimentary, but have hidden and disguised meanings within them that are not at all harmless and complimentary.

And that is often the way of our "language of the South". We Southerners have a "personality" all our own. And I must confess to you that I love our "Southern personality", the manner and demeanor with which our people hold themselves and express themselves, especially our more "senior aged" people, and especially our ladies.

I haven't spent much time in the North, but on those occasions when I have ventured above the Mason-Dixon Line, I have immediately noticed a very distinct difference from

our folks here in the South. The mannerisms, the accents, and the voice inflections of our northern neighbors is generally “not pleasing” to my “sensibilities”.

And again, I do enjoy the “personality” of our south . . . the “charm” that takes place within our conversations and within our mannerisms. Here in the South, we seem to have very few “one syllable words” in our vocabulary. And when “one syllable words” are used, they are often disguised with a friendly “drawl”.

Don’t we love to ask questions like, “How are y’all?” Or “How are youuuu?” Again, I do confess that I love our very distinct “southern personality”.

Another question . . . are such personalities, voice inflections and mannerisms a “good thing”? I think so! But I also know that much of what we are being warned about here in these words of scripture can often be “hidden” within our “southern charm”.

Today, I have entitled the message, “The Subtlety of Partiality”, with emphasis to be put on the word “subtle”. And hopefully, by the end of this message, we’ll be able to see how the sinful behavior of “subtle partiality” can work its way into and within our behaviors, and our responses and even into our Christianity.

By definition, the word “subtle” implies “hidden undertones” and meanings. And yes, when used rightly, “subtle” words and mannerisms can be very good and kind and helpful. But “subtleties” can also have hidden measures of wrong intent and unkindness disguised within them. And for that reason, I often give “subtleties” a second look, just to make sure of what I’m dealing with.

I’ve often heard a somewhat humorous reference made to the “very southern” expression “bless his heart” or “bless her heart”, implying that you can say whatever you would like about someone, both good and not-so-good, as long as you accompany what you say with “bless his heart” or “bless her heart”.

What do these things have to do with these truths that God wants us to receive regarding “showing partiality”, partiality towards the people in our churches, in our friendships, in our businesses and also even within the settings of our own families?

It is this! First, recall that one of the very distinctive descriptions that these scriptures apply to the person of our enemy “satan” is this word “subtle”. In Genesis 3, verse 1 we read . . .

1 Now the serpent was more subtle than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1)

Here with this wording, a very distinct contrast is being drawn between the malicious designs of satan and the virtuous perception of Adam and Eve. And “subtlety” is the weaponry that satan is using to wedge his way into their minds and to tempt them.

Some of the bible translations use other, more modern words for “subtle”, such as “crafty” and “cunning”, but they all seem to give us the same understanding of satan’s intent. It is his desire to “beguile” and to bring harm to Adam and Eve. And he succeeded.

And satan wants to do the same with you and me. And the setting of these words of our scripture text is an excellent opportunity for “subtle” mistreatment of other people, again whether it be within a church setting or outside of it.

Listen again to some of these words.

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? (James 2:1-4)

Folks, this kind of circumstance is such an excellent opportunity for us to “do things wrong”, and especially without even realizing that we are doing it.

We know from history, that such things took place in very obvious ways in our past, especially when churches openly discriminated against black folks. But also, as these verses warn, there was also open discrimination within the church between the wealthy

and the poor. In some of the older church buildings, you can see remnants of that kind of behavior in the placement of the seating. There were even separate rooms to the side and at the back of the church sanctuaries where the “less fortunate” would sit.

It could have been said that “all” were “welcome” to come to the church, but again, hidden within that word “welcome”, there were “subtle” and “not-so-subtle” differences being made. And while some within the congregation might truly have wanted to minister to “all” its members, we know that there were also those among them who were simply “condescending”, and some, for appearances sake only.

And here in this passage, God puts in a warning that should be taken into consideration. He tells us . . .

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?
(James 2:5-7)

Over my years of working at French Camp, these verses, and others like them, have been “convicting” to me when, as the Financial Manager, I would rush to “welcome” some of our wealthier donors to the campus. I would show them around and spend extra time with them. And no, I did not respond as enthusiastically with those visitors who were not “big donors”. And I would often question my motives!

I would try to soothe my conscience with the assurance that our ministry needed “big donors” to feed the kids and pay the bills. Which was very true. But still, my behavior was questionable and probably wrong.

As for our churches, we can rejoice that such practices as the ones described here in these scriptures are not often “openly” practiced in most of our Christian churches today. But these scriptures are warning us that although such behaviors may not often be “openly” practiced, there is still reason to examine the “not-so-open” behaviors that might reside within us, deep within our souls. God tells us here in verse 8,

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 2:8-9)

I can recall a situation that took place at the church in Houlka where I pastored for many years. During one of the Sunday School class times, a man, a stranger, came into the sanctuary where we were holding our class.

Thinking back, I can recall what first went through my mind. I remember that I had some 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 that one was even worse than the first.

I quickly sized the man up, remembered that he had been by our church on another occasion a year or two earlier, asking for financial help. And by his clothing, his scruffy appearance and his demeanor, and knowing that He had been by before to ask for money, my thoughts went to "this man is a "panhandler", looking for a handout.

Did you notice in the words that I just used, that there was no "compassion", no "kindness", and no "love" within my assessment of this man, no Godly "spiritual" thoughts, only a "secular" evaluation of a stranger who was standing in front of me.

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

Thanks be to God; the whole matter didn't turn out quite as badly as it may now sound from my words. The Holy Spirit was eventually able to wedge His way into my mind, and over the remaining few minutes that the man was 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" too much with my handling of the matter.

The man did ask for money, but I had left my wallet in my car. So, as we went outside to retrieve my wallet, I saw that he had other family members with him, his wife, a baby

and two other small children. He made no move to unload his family from the truck and to come into the church. So, I concluded that his intent was for me to just give him money and then he would be on his way.

And yes, thankfully, along with some money, 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 even then, it was solely because of some quick intervention by the Holy Spirit.

Looking back on that incident, what was it that went wrong in my response? Simply put, I was “caught off-guard” and my response was at best a secular kind of “knee-jerk” reaction and not at all “Christianly” in nature.

And folks, as a church, you and I ought never to be caught off-guard in that way. I don’t know if a similar kind of incident has ever taken place here. But if it does, we really ought not be caught off-guard. We ought instead to be prepared to respond as Christians.

We ought to know right things to think, and right things to say and right things to do. And especially, we don’t want the first thing to take place within our minds to be that of “judging” that person.

Folks, how many times have we said from this pulpit that God is Sovereign and that He is Providential, meaning that if a man and his family suddenly show up here and he asks for money, he may very well have been sent this way by the Lord. He may not know that the Lord directed him here, but that doesn’t matter.

Even more, and mysteriously so, we may be “entertaining angels unawares”. Does not that thought make you want to do it right!

Let's think again for a moment about the title of this message, "The Subtlety of Partiality". What is it that often goes on in our minds when we are being confronted with one of those unannounced circumstances?

For myself, and I'll let you speak for yourself, but for myself, "a spirit of pride" and "a judgmental spirit" within my soul rear their ugly heads. "Pride" and a "judgmental spirit" that asks, "well, why doesn't that man get a job and support his family".

And if I let my "judgmental spirit" go another step, I'll begin to think, "all he's going to do with the money is buy drugs or alcohol. And his kids probably won't see a nickel of the money."

Now, here in today's scripture text, James is describing a regular "church setting", much like ours. And God is giving us guidance as to how our church ought to respond to those people who come amongst us. And it's clear that we ought to have everything in place so that we can have the exact right response and do the exact right thing.

Folks, 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)

So then, may I ask you and me, individually, and as a church body, though an incident such as took place with us on that other Sunday might never take place here, would it not be the right thing for us to do to prepare ourselves for such an encounter, perhaps, make a plan for who will be the first person to go and to speak to the person. Should more than one of us go to him and "welcome him", in at least the same manner that we would welcome a wealthy and upstanding person?

Should we not even plan to forfeit our Sunday School time together and for some of us to get up and offer the man and his family some coffee and cookies from the kitchen? Should we perhaps 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, should we be prepared to take them up the highway and pay for their lodging at a motel?

There are several things that God is teaching us in this passage. But it seems, most importantly, that God does not want us to allow our hearts and minds to be caught up in having and displaying a “prideful” and “judgmental spirit”. Because, judging others, in the manner that God describes here, is sinful, and is always displeasing to Him. 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 judgmental 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 those things 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)