

The Case of the Near-Sighted Usher

James 2:1-13
David H. Roper

I have a friend back in Texas who told me an unforgettable Texas story about ten years ago and I've never been able to get the thing out of my mind because it is so true. There was a young attorney with a law firm in Dallas, a bachelor about twenty-eight or twenty-nine-years-old who lived alone in an apartment. It was customary every Thanksgiving for this particular law firm to distribute turkeys among the employees and this man could never figure out what to do with his. Being single he really didn't want to cook the thing and he could never consume all of it anyway. So every Thanksgiving it was a problem to know how to dispose of this bird. The distribution of the turkeys was always with a great deal of pomp and ceremony. The president of the firm would line them all up on a table, and each person would have to file by and get his turkey.

One particular Thanksgiving some of this young man's friends decided they would do him in. So they stole his turkey and replaced it with a bogus one made of paper-mache. They wrapped it with brown paper and had just the neck and tail of the real turkey showing. It looked for all the world like the others. The time came to distribute them and when the president gave him his he took it home on the streetcar.

He was sitting there with this thing in his lap when a man came down the aisle and sat down with him. He was obviously down on his luck, a little shabby and run down at the heels. They struck up a conversation and the man told what had happened to him. He had been hunting for a job all day but had had no luck whatever. He had only a dollar or two in his pocket with which to buy something for a Thanksgiving meal for his family. He was quite concerned because he knew his children would be disappointed.

So the light came on in this young attorney's mind. He thought, "Here's where I can do my new friend a service and can also get rid of this bird." His first thought was to give him the turkey but then he thought, "No, that might offend him. I'll sell him the turkey." So he asked the man how much money he had with him. The man said, "Two dollars." He said, "I'll sell you the turkey for two dollars." So they made the transaction and both were very satisfied. The man got off the street car with his turkey and the attorney went home with his money.

Well, you can imagine the scene when this man arrived at his home. The children gathered around the table, all excited, and they unwrapped the turkey and there was this phony bird. You know what he must have thought. "Of all the dirty, low-down, no-good blankety-blanks, that guy takes the cake!" To make a long story short, the young attorney went back to the office the day after Thanksgiving and discovered what had happened. He was appalled, and he and his friends rode the streetcar for a whole week trying to find this man again. They walked the streets and knocked on doors. They would have done anything to set this matter right but they never found him.

That story keeps coming back to me because it depicts so vividly the impossibility of judging the motives of other people. We simply do not know their hearts. Our tendency so often is to cast judgment on a person because of something that he does, or because of some outward appearance, or some other external factor, when

we simply don't know what is going on inside. James addresses a word to us in this regard in the first thirteen verses of his second chapter where he deals with the problem of prejudice, or the making of superficial judgments.

Chapter 1, you remember, concerned suffering -- how to utilize it in your life and some of the hindrances to its utilization. In chapter 2 James takes up the question of partiality. It is a very easy section to outline. The first verse is a statement of the principle, a word of exhortation. Verses 2 through 4 is an illustration of the principle. Verses 5 through 11 is an explanation of the principle wherein James tells us why it is so important that we heed it. Then the last two verses are a word of conclusion. Let's look at the principle as James states it in verse 1:

My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

The word translated "show . . . partiality" is a Greek word that means "to receive by face," i.e., to judge on the basis of some external or superficial factor--to judge a man by the color of his skin, or the length of his hair, or the kind of clothes he wears, or the sort of academic credentials he carries, or his economic status. This is what James is talking about when he says, "Do not show partiality." "Do not receive a man by face." We cannot judge on the basis of externals. This word is used a number of other times in the New Testament. But in every other case God is the subject of the sentence and it is expressed negatively. "God does not show partiality." "God is not a respecter of persons." "God does not receive people by face." God doesn't judge by externals; he judges the heart.

There is a vivid illustration of this in I Samuel 16. There was a time in the history of Israel when God rejected Saul as king and commissioned Samuel to anoint his successor. Samuel was led by the Lord to the family of Jesse. As he was looking at Jesse's sons, his eyes alighted upon Eliab, the eldest. Eliab must have been a very big, impressive, handsome young man, and Samuel thought, "Surely this must be the Lord's choice. He has all the marks of kingship about him." He should have learned from Saul that such was not necessarily the case, for Saul certainly had a stature befitting a king. But the Lord said to Samuel, "Don't judge this man on the basis of his appearance and stature, because I have rejected him." God does not see as man does; man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart.

You see, the people whom God draws to himself are not necessarily the tall, dark, and handsome. Many of them are the short, shot, and shapeless. He is not impressed by external features or factors but by the condition of a man's heart. That is why James says it is inconsistent to hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ and, at the same time, to judge a man on the basis of some external. We just can't do it. God does not judge that way, and if Jesus Christ is Lord in our life then we cannot judge that way either.

James goes on to give us an illustration of something that was taking place in the meetings of the believers at this time:

For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "Have a seat here, please," while you say to the poor man, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet, " have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

One of the indications that this book is a very early book, perhaps the earliest of the New Testament, is the fact that in the Greek James refers to the "assembly" as a "synagogue." This was before the Christians had been ousted from the Jewish places of worship. They were gathering on the first day of the week and worshipping in

the synagogues. James depicts a scene that apparently was occurring week after week. Two men might enter they synagogue, one obviously well dressed and wealthy, the other quite shabby. The well-dressed man was given preferential treatment. He was very politely, cordially ushered to one of the best seats in the synagogue while the shabbily dressed man was forced to stand or to sit under the footstool of someone else. James says that when you do that you make distinctions with evil motives.

We need to distinguish here between what the Scriptures say about judging with proper motives and judging with evil motives. When we judge with evil motives we are condemning a man. But when we judge with a good motive our desire is to correct. There is a judgment that takes place within the body of Christ when believers are sinning. The Scriptures say that if you see a brother sinning those of you who are spiritual, who are walking in the Spirit, are to go to that man and, in a spirit of meekness and patience and love, you are to restore such a man. If we see a man violating a specific commandment or scripture then the most loving thing we can do is to go to that man and correct him, restore him. It is the redemptive thing to do. And we must carry out that sort of judgment. But the sort of judgment that James describes is wrong because we are judging with the wrong motive. We are trying to exalt ourselves, trying to further our own program. We want to associate with the wealthy, with people of status, because of what it does for us. But James says that we cannot carry on that type of judgment.

James explains why we are not to judge superficially and provides us with three clear reasons. The first in verse 5, is that it is not in accord with the choice of God. The second is found in the latter part of verse 6: it is in accord with the conduct of the godless. The third is in verse 8: it is contrary to the command of Scripture. Let's look at them in more detail:

Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man.

"God has chosen the poor man," James writes, "but you have dishonored him." Isn't it obvious that God has chosen the poor? There are many among us who are poor. They are part of the family. God has brought them to himself. The Greek verb James uses is in the middle voice. It means "to choose for yourself." God has chosen them to sustain a loving relationship with him. He does not merely tolerate the poor. He has chosen them in order to pour himself out to them, to love them. And James says that we can do nothing less.

Do I have the right to reject someone whom God has chosen? Can I bar him from my church, exclude him from my home and my table and my friendship and love? I cannot. God has chosen the black people. He has chosen brown people. He has chosen white people. Can I exclude them? He never asked me whom to include in the church. He just chose them on the basis of his mercy and grace. He never inquired as to what I thought; he just chose them. Do I have any right to exclude them from my love? God chose hippies. Can I exclude them?

I was speaking recently on the passage in 2 Corinthians 4 in which Paul characterizes his own ministry as the proclamation of "Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake," and I was describing what is meant by servanthood--that we submit ourselves to people--all kinds of people. Not just the kinds of people that we would normally respect, but all kinds. A lady at the back of the room raised her hand and asked this question: "Isn't it true that God hung the first hippie?"

For a moment that didn't register with me and I asked her what she meant. She reminded me of the Old Testament story of Absalom, David's long-haired son. He rebelled against his father and later on accidentally hanged himself in a tree by his long hair as he rode through the forest. Frankly, I was appalled, because God

doesn't hang hippies -- God loves them. As a matter of fact, God hung his own Son for hippies and for street people. God loves these kids. He chose them for himself. Can I exclude them? Am I going to bar them from my home and my table? I don't have that right. To dishonor the poor man, James says, is to reject God's choice. God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. They are brothers.

The second reason James says that we must not judge on the basis of superficial factors is that to do so is to ally ourselves with the conduct of the godless:

Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme that honorable name by which you are called?

It is a matter of historical records that wealthy Jewish overlords were oppressing the poverty-stricken Christians of this time, as I mentioned earlier in this series. People had lost their jobs, their businesses were being boycotted, some had lost everything and were destitute, and they were being hounded by the wealthy Jews in the community. James says that if we oppress the poor or if we judge them by their poverty we ally ourselves with those who blaspheme the name of Jesus Christ. Because that is the way the world, the unbelieving world, looks at others. They oppress them, they exploit them, they are guilty of injustice. But James says that we can't do that. We can't oppress them; we must serve them. We must not drag them into court; we should be willing to be defrauded, if necessary, rather than to do that. We must glorify the name of Jesus Christ by our charitable actions toward them.

The third reason that we cannot judge superficially is that it is a violation of the command of Scripture:

If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, you do well...

The royal law is the law of the King, the law of love, and if we are fulfilling the royal law then we are doing well. That is, if your preferential treatment of a wealthy man is because you really love him and are seeking to meet his needs, then you do well.

But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

Everything that we do, James says, ought to be controlled by the law of love. This is the law that sums up all the Old Testament laws: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength . . . and your neighbor as yourself." That ought to govern every action. That is the motive which ought to distinguish us as believers.

Love is difficult to define. Scripture never tries to give us a text book or dictionary definition of love. In the New Testament God directs us to look at himself, or to look at his Son, if we want to see what love is. John says, "This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins." That is what love is--it is the giving of yourself. Paul says in Ephesians 5 that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her". That is the nature of the love that we receive from Jesus Christ. It isn't dependent upon the lovableness of the people who are the objects of that love, nor upon any external feature which would naturally draw us to them. It is apart from all that.

One of my young student friends gave me a poem not too long ago. I don't claim credit for it. It's called "Paul's Girl" and any resemblance between this poem and persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Paul's girl is rich and haughty;
My girl is poor as clay.
Paul's girl is young and pretty;
My girl looks like a bale of hay.
Paul's girl is smart and clever;
My girl is dumb, but good.
But would I trade my girl for Paul's?
You bet your life I would!

That is the kind of love we too often display. If the object of our love is young and pretty and clever then she just naturally evokes a response of love. But what if the object looks like a bale of hay? Do you see what James is saying? If we have truly received Jesus as Lord then there will be a change in our life. He will be our source of love. And we will be motivated by that source of love to reach out toward other people--even if they're not "our kind of people", even if they don't wear the right clothes, or don't wear their hair the way we like, or don't have the kind of background we would prefer. We love them anyway.

Verses 10 and 11 are directed toward our tendency to rationalize:

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," said also, "Do not kill." If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law.

Our tendency is to say, "But, James, I may be guilty of discriminating against certain types of people, but I've never been a murderer or an adulterer. How can you call me a lawbreaker?" James says that if you break any of the law you become a transgressor of all of it. And in James' eyes it is just as serious to be discriminatory toward others as it is to be a murderer or an adulterer. It really makes no difference. The law is like a pane of glass: if you break part of it, you break it all. And if there is in our life this sort of prejudicial attitude toward people, if we are sitting in judgment on people because of the way they look or because they don't meet our expectations, James says we have broken the whole law, we are transgressors, and it is really no different in God's eyes than being an adulterer or an adulteress or a murderer.

James now comes to his conclusion:

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

The law of liberty is the law of love. James says, "Speak and act as people who are judged by the law of love." God judges us on the basis of his mercy and his grace. It is not because we are clever or handsome, nor because we are the right weight or the right height or the right size, nor because we have the right IQ. That is not the basis upon which we are accepted by God. We are accepted solely because of his mercy and grace. That is what we are judged by, and James says we must act as people who are judged on that basis. He goes on to say,

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment.

His point is that if we do not show mercy toward others, if we don't accept people as God accepts them, then it is obvious that we have not ourselves accepted the mercy of God. But if we are merciful and open hearted and responsive and loving, and are reaching out to people who are not "our kind", it is an evidence that we have received the mercy of God. Our mercy doesn't have any purchasing power. That is not what gains God's favor.

It is evidential -- it shows that we fully understand the basis of our acceptance before God.

The parable of the unjust steward was Jesus way of highlighting this same principle. A man owes \$10 million dollars to his creditor. He is forgiven completely. He walks out on the street and the first man he meets is one of his debtors. He grabs him by the throat and tries to extract \$20 from him. So his creditor brings him back to face judgment because it is obvious that this man does not understand the degree nor the quality of forgiveness he has received. He doesn't understand the basis of his acceptance. That is what James is saying to us. If we understand how much we have been forgiven, if we see the infinite debt of which we have been forgiven, if we understand the basis on which the Father accepts us, then we will show mercy to others.

This is a very timely chapter for us in this period of our own experience here together as a body of believers because we are discovering that God is bringing together such a diverse and heterogeneous group. Jeff Squires said recently that he looked down the pew and saw representatives of five different cultures. This is especially true on Sunday nights--street kids, straight people, members of the Establishment, students, executives, artisans, blacks, whites, orientals, every type of person you could imagine gathers . . . because Jesus is Lord. There are no distinctions. We can accept one another in our homes, and give of our love and assistance and friendship. But the enemy would like nothing better than to destroy the sense of unity which God has built. So I leave you with James' final word on the subject;

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

Prayer:

Father, we thank you that we are accepted in the Beloved, that we are accepted not because of what we are but solely on the basis of your mercy and grace. We thank you that because you are an indwelling Lord and because we can lay hold of your resources, we can extend the same mercy, the same acceptance, to others. Teach us, Lord, to act and speak as those who are judged under the law of love. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.

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