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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“PLAYING FAVORITES” ~ James 2:1-13

☑ As a seminary Senior I was looking for a church to serve when I connected with Faith Covenant in Essex, Iowa. Their search committee interviewed me, and I asked some questions of my own. They invited me to candidate, and Beth and I met the people and took a look around the town. Then they issued a formal call. I was free to decline it, but we prayed and discussed it and I accepted.

I was a little nervous, but excited. God led us to the people I was meant to shepherd in the place I was destined to serve, and I couldn't wait to be their pastor.

Then I started my ministry – and the people who had been so eager for my leadership treated me like a hired hand. The people who had been so interested in my fresh ideas resisted every modest proposal. The people who had put a premium on preaching and teaching did not listen. The people who had been warm and hospitable were distant and demanding.

It was like falling in love and taking vows, only to wake up and discover that your spouse is quite different in marriage than they were in courtship.

Would Beth and I love the church, warts and all, and stay? Or would we insist on loving the church we had expected them to be, and leave because they weren't it?

We remained in Essex for seven years. Life and ministry there were often frustrating, occasionally excruciating. Yet it was not wasted time, because God used it to make us more like Christ Jesus. He taught us

many truths there, one of which is that it is he who chooses our spiritual siblings, and not we ourselves.

■ James 2:1: **“My brothers [and sisters], as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.”**

○ This goes back to Leviticus 19:15: **“Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.”** Observation 1) favoritism is a sin regardless of the beneficiary; but who is more likely to get preferential political, judicial, financial, and social treatment: the rich and powerful, or poor and powerless? Observation 2) favoritism within the Church is the same kind of thing as favoritism in the world of politics and law and economics.

James also draws a tight connection between the glory of Messiah and our relationships. The One we worship {McKnight} **“left the glorious presence of God, entered ... into the impoverished state of the human condition, and has now returned to that glorious state of splendor: he is the [voluntarily] poor and now exalted one.”** Thus, it is outrageous hypocrisy if we do not identify **“with the doubly glorious [Christ] who [so] humbly identified with”** the poor and lowly.

We should note that Scripture does not ban holy friendship. That is a gift that edifies us and glorifies God. Favoritism is a curse; it consists not only of embracing one brother or sister, but also of excluding or rejecting another.

■ James follows this direct instruction with a real-life scenario in verses 2-4. Suppose a wealthy person comes into worship wearing elegant clothes and exquisite jewelry, and we make a fuss over them and usher them to the best seat in the house. Now suppose a poor person “**in filthy old clothes comes in**” and we try to ignore them but they don’t go away, so we direct them to a less desirable spot. Have we not “**discriminated among [ourselves] and become judges with evil thoughts?**”

☑ The temptation runs deep, doesn’t it? A visibly needy man rang the doorbell as I was preparing this message. I spoke kindly and treated him with respect; but when I first saw him, I wished he looked more affluent than he did – not for his sake, but for mine.

■ V.v. 5-6: “**Listen, dear brothers and sisters: 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?**”

☑ The sobering news for us is that, from a global perspective, no one in this sanctuary is poor. {Giving What We Can} If your annual household income from all sources is a modest \$20,000 after taxes and 5 people live in your home, you are richer than 77% of the world population and your income is 3.5 times that of the average person on this planet.

Take Europe, North America, and Australia out of the equation, and we are far more elite than that. Even the man who asked me for money is better off than the majority of Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. Truly, we are rich in money and things.

The good news is that, by the grace of God, some of us who are materially wealthy are also rich in faith, and we will inherit the kingdom. Still, the Lord warns us in no uncertain terms that {Mt 19:23, TNIV} “**it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.**”

But favoritism in the Church is not only a matter of rich and poor. It can revolve around race, color, ethnicity, political conviction, marital status, denominational affiliation, worship preferences, you name it. Individual Christ Followers have been excluded and entire congregations have been gutted by sinful favoritism.

■ The opposite of favoritism is *αγαπε* [agape] love. James 2:8-9: “**If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.**”

○ Remember what Jesus, the Lord of the Church said: {Mt 22:37-40} “**‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**”

This is a lot of verses to devote to the topic of favoritism. *Is favoritism really that bad? Is it actually the opposite of love?* Let's contrast them.

① Favoritism spawns affinity groups. *Αγαπε* love creates the Church.

An affinity group is a set of people who share a natural bond or natural interests. It is difficult to distinguish religious affinity groups from the Church because many exist as Christian congregations.

The crucial difference is that while the Church is united by Jesus, affinity groups are held together by something else (ethnicity, a political ideal, a social cause, etc.). Take the love of Jesus out of the Church and it disintegrates; remove *αγαπε* from an affinity group, and it will hang together. In an affinity group an "outsider" might be allowed formal membership, but you are not really "one of us" unless you share our natural bond or interest. But in the Church you are my brother or sister so long as you've got Jesus.

② Favoritism builds and protects human kingdoms. *Αγαπε* love manifests and serves God's Kingdom.

Worldly-wise leaders effectively use favoritism to build human kingdoms. They pander to our preference to feel special, to unite with our affinity group, and to help those who look and think like us, while ignoring or excluding those who do not. This strategy has its benefits. It gets results – for worldly kingdoms.

As James says, *Αγαπε* Love is "**the royal law**," the Law of God's Kingdom. It requires us to extend hospitality

and practical care to the person in filthy old clothes as to the gold-fingered rich man. It obliges us to {Mic 6:8} be kind and merciful to Democrats, Republicans, and Tea Partiers alike. It demands that we deal honorably with Muslims and secularists as well as Christians. Doing so might – or might not – win us any favors from those who prefer favoritism. But it will manifest and serve God's Kingdom.

③ Favoritism devalues human beings made in the image of God, thereby dishonoring God. *Αγαπε* love esteems human beings and exalts God.

Preferential treatment elevates one person at the expense of another. There is no escaping it. It says, "You are of greater significance" to one and "You are of lesser worth" to the other.

Does God the Father love and value one more than the other? How can we dare to do so? This dishonors God.

Did God the Son die and rise for one but not for the other? How can we think and behave as those did? This dishonors God.

Does God the Spirit seek to save the one but not the other? How can we judge one to be worthwhile but dismiss the other as a waste of time? This dishonors God.

Not only does *αγαπε* love esteem other human beings, it exalts the Living God who created them, who has given his Son to redeem them, and who has sent his Holy Spirit to seek them out.

I began by talking about the first church I served. We were tempted to leave within a few months of starting ministry there, but we chose to stay. After a couple years we were sorely tempted again to get out of Essex, but God made it clear that a move was not within his good and perfect will.

The Lord of the Church taught us that he is the One who selects our brothers and sisters. He alone has the authority to choose who will get the lion's share of our *αγαπε* love.

That is what James 2:1-13 is all about. It is an invitation and a command to love these brothers and sisters whom God has given us, rather than the "better" ones we can imagine.

■ If we love each other and do not show favoritism, we are keeping "the royal law" and "doing right." Let us **"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"**