

HOW FAITH OVERCOMES PREJUDICE

James 2:1-13

Sermon for Peace Church

May 17, 2009

PURPOSE – To confront people with the sin of prejudice and give them the theological and spiritual tools to overcome it in the mercy of God.

MAIN IDEA – Prejudice is in every human heart and it divides us from the faith-gifts of others ... so let's overcome it in our heart in the reality of God's mercy!

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to James 2:1 (p. 1881)

1. We continue our series through this book, its theme being, "THE TESTS OF TRUE FAITH". Today's test has to do with prejudice.

HOW DOES TRUE FAITH RELATE TO PREJUDICE?

- (i) The title of this section more or less tells: "Favoritism Forbidden".

Don't show favoritism! - Verse 1 – *My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ*"

Favoritism is an expression of prejudice on the POSITIVE SIDE.

= we have PRE-JUDGED someone favorably ... preferentially.

A. Typically, when we think of prejudice, we think of discriminating AGAINST someone for a particular reason. Favoritism / discrimination = are two SIDES of the SAME COIN ... as we'll observe in reading this passage from God's Holy Word – from which we learn that prejudice is an AFFRONT to true faith and IN WHICH we are given the spiritual resources to overcome it!

2. *Read James 2:1-13.*

II. WHAT PREJUDICE IS

1. Prejudice, quite simply, is making a PRE-JUDGMENT about something or someone – “before becoming aware of relevant facts of that case or event or that person.” (Wikipedia definition)

- It is – verse 4 – *discriminating ... and become judges with evil thoughts*

Just to be clear – this does not mean that we never evaluate things as being right or wrong – some people misunderstanding “judging” that way.

I.E. – you’ll say it’s wrong for people to sleep together before they’re married ... and someone will say: WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE? JUDGE NOT LEST YE BE JUDGED!

No! – that’s just having conviction about right & wrong. We can’t help doing that because humans are made in God’s image, with a moral spirit.

What Jesus was referring to there was judgment in a “CONDEMNATION” type of way:
Verse 4 – discriminating & becoming judges with EVIL THOUGHTS

= Self-interest, worldly values

(i) In the context of this passage, it is discriminating based on how someone LOOKS:

- They have fine clothes (v. 2) ... they dress nice ... so ... “Here’s an important person – they’ve got some money, MAKE WAY!”

= that’s ECONOMIC / CLASS PREJUDICE

A. A teenager once wrote her pastor a note about this passage: *Dear Pastor, I can relate to James’ teaching. Kids in my age group are often judged by their clothes. If they wear the right kind of clothes, they’re in. The “dorky” kids get left out. I realize from James’ teaching how wrong that is.*

2. “Don’t judge a book by its cover” – Have you heard that line?

That’s prejudice – making a condemnatory or preferential evaluation based on appearance.

I.e. – I remember hearing Jesse Jackson Jr. – our State Rep in DC - reporting once that he sometimes found it hard to get a CAB in Washington – cause of his looks. His skin is dark – so he’s “prejudged by cabbies” as being an uncertain client, perhaps violent or economically incapable of covering a fare.

= the “relevant facts” of who he is as a state representative – someone more-than-capable economically to cover a cab-fare - are not considered BEFORE a judgment is made.

ETHNIC PREJUDICE ABOUNDS IN OUR SOCIETY!

(Check out the movie “CRASH” if you haven’t yet done so – it’s a brilliant portrayal of how pre-judgments shape the way we act in society – with tragic results!)

3. But PRE-JUDGMENTS are not only made according to looks.

I.e. – I’ve had people who haven’t gone to college tell me how they’re judged incapable of really being able to think. > “You only got a highschool degree? OK – I know who you are! (Meanwhile, they read & self-educate & run businesses).

- There’s DENOMINATIONAL PREJUDICE – “You’re a Reformed pastor – you don’t know how to move & work & pray in the Spirit ... you’re one of those frozen chosen guys!”

- There’s VOCATIONAL PREJUDICE – “You’re a lawyer ... oh... I know who you are!”
= making a decision about someone before relevant facts are known!

4. There’s all kinds of self-centered, self-interested PRE-JUDGMENT – HEAVY people, SHORT people, DIVORCED people, POOR people, Brown, yellow, red people we view a certain way ... before relevant facts are known ... AND HERE’S THE FIRST POINT WE NEED TO LEARN FROM THE TEACHING OF THIS PASSAGE:

- It’s in the CHURCH! ... cause it’s in each human heart!

(i) Verse 1 – When James writes, “*My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism*”, the Greek construction of that command has the sense of “STOP DOING IT”.

- It was already going on in the churches that James wrote to! – Favoritism to the well-dressed; discrimination against those less economically-capable.
- And it was going on in the church because prejudice exists in the hearts of each person, even “believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ”

A. I’ve had church-going people say to me: “I’m not prejudice. I’m not prejudice – NOT ME!”
= That’s so NAÏVE! Do you not know your hearts!?!)

(ii) We are sinful creatures – even after we are born of a new spirit, the effects of that fall remain with us.

And in that act of rebellion, we made ourselves “like God” - taking his place as the determining evaluator of people, we subsequently we judge people, even based on something as superficial & limited as outward appearance!

A. The propensity is in each of us – so an honest Christian will never say, “I’m not prejudice”. For we know that pre-judgment is SADLY in every human heart!

5. But here’s GOOD NEWS. James here teaches us how to begin to RID ourselves of prejudice.
 First, by pointing out its tragic effects;
 Then by teaching the meaning of the gospel and true faith in it!

III. WHAT PREJUDICE DOES

WHAT PREJUDICE DOES!

- Besides the PRIMARY SIN of putting our self in the place of God, there are plenty of other UGLY EFFECTS from prejudice. (SECOND PARAGRAPH)

1. Verse 6 – *You INSULT the poor ...* when you cater preferentially to the rich and your building your church on worldly values.

(i) Why are you cow-towing to money? James asks – Those rich people were even exploiting the church!

- The local realtor was trying to join the church, not to humble himself before the holiness & grace of God, but to drum some new business!!

A. The church is not a club – focused on economic self-survival. We are the Body of Christ – Economics didn’t mean much to him – He lived homeless in this age!

2. Another tragic effect that James points out is in verse 5.

Prejudice blocks the faith-gifts of others.

(i) In his specific situation, James refers to the faith of the poor! – who, v. 5, are typically richer in faith than the well off!

- Jesus Himself said it: *“Blessed are the poor, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* (Lk. 6)

A. Mission trip after mission trip, I’ve heard teams come back to report how great a blessing it was to go and work among those less economically well-off.

The joy of those Dominicans / Ethiopians / Mississippians ENRICHES our faith.

GOD is their life ... NOT TOYS!

So James says that your prejudicial attitudes toward those who are poor are BLOCKING THAT FAITH & THOSE GIFTS from coming into the life of the church!

3. This would be true of any source of prejudice.

We cannot be who God means us to be without the faith of old, young; blacks, whites; rich, poor; disabled, health. (The homogeneous vision of the church – where all look, dress and smell the same - is from worldly thinking, not heavenly!)

DIVERSITY brings richness & FULLNESS of faith! Prejudice cuts that off!

4. In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the CASTE SYSTEM that was dividing the people of India.

So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned.

“If Christians have caste differences also”, he said, “I may as well remain a Hindu.”

TRAGIC! - That usher, that church denied the very meaning of Jesus’ life.

“As believers in our Lord Jesus Christ – v. 1 – don’t show favoritism, or discrimination.”

(i) It’s WRONG for a church to reflect the prejudices of the world!

Whether that be India’s CASTE SYSTEM or the South Suburbs black/white divide!

A. And it has TRAGIC RESULTS! – Imagine if Gandhi had bowed before Jesus as Savior & Lord!

- For his personal sake; for India’s sake

Prejudice denies the meaning of the gospel & true unity in Christ!

IV. OVERCOMING PREJUDICE - Repentance

SO HOW DO WE OVERCOME IT? ... the NEXT 2 PARAGRAPHS

= REPENTANCE & FAITH / REPENTANCE & FAITH – that’s how we always change as Christians! ... and we start in our own hearts.

1. Verses 8-9 – Prejudice is IMMORAL – it’s LAW-BREAKING, James writes.

It breaks the Royal Law: “Love your neighbor as yourself” – Lev. 19:18 & Jesus’ summary of the second tablet of laws.

= Do you like being prejudged because of who you are or what you do or what you haven’t done? ... No – It’s wrong – so don’t do it!

(i) Have you experienced prejudice?

Some of us have way more than others. As an educated white, male in current society I generally have experienced small amounts of prejudice. But the bits I have, I hate it. It’s not fair!

A. I once was invited to speak at McKinley school graduation. The superintendent at that time was a friend of mine. She had heard me speak and she felt led to ask me to speak at her school’s graduation. I accepted – in fact, I shortly thereafter got a word from God on my heart to speak to the kids and families about.

A few weeks later however, her board forced her to withdraw that invitation. She gave a feeble reason why, but she knew that I knew the real reason. How can a middle-age white guy seriously speak into the lives of a predominantly African-American 8th grade graduates and their families?

I was pre-judged as not being able to speak sufficiently meaningfully into their lives. That stunk! The faith gift I had been given was not expressed.

- Now that’s not to deny that a person who has been raised in that culture isn’t better equipped to minister into its nuances. Diversity, culture, experiences are real and good!

But to be prejudged & have my faith-gift stopped was WRONG!

I didn’t like it – and James writes, “love your neighbor as yourself”. Do unto them as you would have them do unto you. Prejudice is IMMORAL!

2. Then he ADDS – vv. 10-11 – it’s not just a SMALL immorality.

- Its guilt is as guilty is adultery & murder.

(i) Sometimes yet today, prejudice is only viewed as being “NOT NICE”.

> “Yea, I know it’s not nice to move away when other skin-colored folk move beside me ... but, you know, what can you do?!”

> “Yea, I know it’s not nice to shy away from that different looking kid at school ...”

> “Yea, I know it’s NOT NICE to write off a fat person – but”

(ii) James wants us to know that prejudice is not about NOT BEING NICE. It's about SIN.

- It's breaking God's law ... and *"whoever stumbles at just one point of it is guilty of breaking it all"*.

3. So whenever & wherever you see prejudice in your heart, REPENT!

- Name it for what it is > "I've pre-judged that person – according to the world; according to self-interest. I've put them in categories & stereotypes that neatly box them in and limit their person & gifts."

> "God forgive me ... I want to be given every opportunity to be who I am to others, yet I am not giving them such opportunity."

- > "God I am sorry – I am guilty – forgive me, change me."

V. OVERCOMING PREJUDICE – Faith

SECOND, believe in God's mercy ... really believe in it. Hear this description of TRUE FAITH:

Verse 12 - Speak & 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.

1. In Jesus Christ, God offers MERCY to us – Mercy that frees us to be who we are before Him, WARTS & ALL! Do you believe that?

I think that most of us know that we need mercy.

... But not everyone BELIEVES in that mercy!

2. To believe in that mercy is to recognize that, no matter how different people are – rich/poor, black/white, big/small – we are all ONE in our need for forgiveness from God.

- In the most fundamental way before God, we're no different – because we all fall short of God's holy call and we need mercy.

- As it's been put: THE GROUND AT THE CROSS IS LEVEL

- There's no one more important, less important at the Cross!

To believe in God's mercy puts us on EYE LEVEL with any other fellow human being ... flat-faced on the ground!

3. More than that, true belief is “speaking & act” (v. 12) as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom – God’s mercy in Jesus.

To overcome prejudice, true faith SPEAKS mercifully – goes over to the poor person and says, “Welcome – I’m glad you’re here!” ...

True faith ACTS mercifully ... “Let’s have lunch”.

(i) That means that true faith WILL BE INTENTIONAL to overcome to prejudices that might arise in the heart.

It’s not only a matter of repentance, it’s a matter of action (and James will pick this up in his next section of the letter).

4. TRUE FAITH ACTS TO OVERCOME PREJUDICE.

You can’t just tread water about it – because the currents of this world will drift you into places that God does not want you or His Church to be.

The world is FULL OF PRE-JUDGMENT ... Faith swims upstream against it!

(i) Faith is learning about issues of culture & race – and then doing something about it.

(ii) Faith is learning the issues of the aged – then doing something about it

(iii) Faith is building relationships with the poor – and receiving their gifts of faith.

VI. CONCLUSION

THIS IS GOD’S VISION FOR HIS CHURCH

1. *“MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT”!* (last line of our passage)

Mercy triumphs over judgment – bringing freedom for people to be received for who they are.

(i) We gather here each Sunday to RECEIVE that truth.

In Jesus Christ, God’s mercy has triumphed over the judgment of the law against my life.

In Jesus Christ, God has provided a means of escape from judgment & guilt.

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

2. Do you believe that?

When you do, prejudice becomes DISMANTLED in your hearts.

And THE CHURCH is set free to become a place where rich & poor are truly welcomed, black & white, young and old. The prejudices of this world become DISMANTLED.

3. That is God's vision for the Church:

A mercy-generated heterogeneous (not homogeneous – same class & skin color) – heterogeneous – from every tribe, language, people and nation (Rev. 7) – united in the praise of God's agent of mercy & freedom, Jesus Christ.

We get there through HONEST REPENTANCE & TRUE FAITH which speaks & acts in the mercy of God ... in Jesus name.

AMEN!