

Looking Out Against Favoritism

May 3, 2009 - James 2:1-13

When ordinary looking 47 year old Susan Boyle marched onto the stage, the crowd and judges moaned. What was this unemployed middle aged woman from a small village in England doing on the stage of “Britain’s Got Talent?” Judge Simon Cowell, who also judges on American Idol, asked what her dream was? “I want to be a professional singer,” she answered. Simon smirked and asked why it hasn’t worked out yet. She said she had not had the opportunity. Co-judge Amanda Holden put her hands up behind her head as Susan prepared to sing. It looked like she was bracing herself for the most humiliating 3 minutes in Susan Boyle’s life. Piers Morgan, the third judge, said nothing but you could tell by his eyes that he too anticipated an awkward moment.

The cameras panned over the crowds showing teenagers sneering and rolling their eyes. Here was a 47 year old woman with an ordinary look and out of style hair on their hip, cool show. What could she possibly do?

Simon asked her, “What are you going to sing?” She answered, “I dreamed a dream from Les Miserables.” The music started. The audience awkwardly waited. Then Susan began to sing.

But instead of an embarrassing moan, the audience collectively dropped their jaws. Out of Susan’s mouth came a beautiful voice that raised the roof. They broke into spontaneous applause. Every judge’s eyes went wide with amazement. During one of the highest notes, 2 of the judges stood and applauded.

When it was over, Susan began walking off the stage before the judges had their say. The back stage managers had to direct her back on the stage. Judge Piers Morgan said “that is the biggest shock I have ever had in 3 years of this show.” Amanda Holden said “I think when you stood there everyone was against you. We were all very cynical. That is the biggest wake up call ever.” One youtube video of Susan’s performance has been viewed almost 50 million times. Over 200,000 people have left comments. They include: A spectacular triumph over stereotype. The voice.... stole the hearts of millions, brought tears to both men and women alike, sent a tidal wave of goose bumps around the world. Respect to you Susan Boyle... Susan - you are just PERFECT as you are! You are just beautiful - inside & out!

Now why did this three or four minute episode create such a sensation? It exposed how prone we humans are to judge others by external appearance. It revealed how quickly we can show favoritism to someone based on something external. We live in an image driven society. We can overemphasize the external and quickly jump to conclusions.

That happened on Britain's Got Talent. But it happens every day in many different forms. We can make conclusions about someone based on their skin color or ethnic origin. We can make judgments about someone because of their age, accent or clothes. We can label someone because they come from that neighborhood or the wrong side of the tracks.

A couple of years ago, the Protestant School Board had to make a decision about space for the Logos program. Since Leo Nickerson school was becoming overcrowded, the proposal was to move some of the classes to E.S. Gish school on Akins Drive. The trustees held public meetings about this possibility. I could not believe some of the comments made about the Akinsdale community. All residents of that community were painted with the same brush.

The same attitude can happen within a church. We can favor people who like us and agree with us about the way things should be done. But those that have different ideas we shun or ignore. We discover someone has a different theological position than we do on a topic. So we can label them and hold back from them because "you know what they believe."

Favoritism can also permeate a family. Parents may favor one child over another. Some families turn a blind eye to some wrong going on within because of favoritism for the family. Or we can favor those who have the same style we have and oppose those who don't. So if you are a punctual, organized and planned out individual, you will find it difficult to deal with someone who is laid back, less organized and spontaneous. What does God think of favoritism?

God forbids favoritism and favors fairness. God commands His people to show no tolerance for favoritism. Instead He calls us to show loving mercy and fairness to all, like He does for us. If we as a church are going to look out in prayer and ministry to our community and around the world, we must heed God's command. We must turn

to Him to root out any favoritism within us so we can show fair mercy to all.

Jesus' brother James addresses this. It must have been interesting for James growing up. We don't know James' age or birth order. We don't know if he ever experienced jealousy because he thought Joseph and Mary favored Jesus. But we do know that God moved James to write the most extensive section in the New Testament against favoritism. James addressed the entire early church. There seemed to be a problem with favoritism in the church's early beginnings. James sets out to correct this in his letter to the churches.

So today we're going to hear from God through James and seek answers to these questions. What is favoritism? Why does God forbid it? What does He command instead of it? How will we respond? Please find James 2 in your Bibles or on the insert in your bulletin.

James 2:1-13 NIV

Favoritism Forbidden

¹My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also

comes in. ³If 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," ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, 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? ⁶But 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? ⁷Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself,"^[a] you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹For he who said, "Do not commit adultery,"^[b] also said, "Do not murder."^[c] If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹²Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! Central truth God forbids favoritism and favors fairness. What is favoritism?

The Greek word translated "favoritism" or "partiality" is a compound of two words; receive and face. So the verb means to "receive the face." So partiality means consider the face of another person and then make a judgment based upon that. One commentator defines favoritism this way: to make judgments and distinctions based

on external considerations, such as physical appearance, social status or race.

Such favoritism is never found in God. In 1 Samuel 16:7 God says to Samuel “Do not consider his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” The New Testament declares favoritism is never found in God.

- Romans 2:11 – For God shows no partiality. (In doling out wrath and fury).
- Ephesians 6:9 (NKJV). 9 And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.
- Colossians 3:25 (NKJV). 25 But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.
- Favoritism considering the law – no favoritism with God.

What’s wrong with favoritism?

Verse 1 tells us - **It is inconsistent for those who hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.** (1) A favoritism based on external considerations is inconsistent with faith in the One who came

to break down the barriers of nationality, race, class, gender and religion. English Standard Version (ESV) says “show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”

It’s like he’s saying favoritism and faith in Christ are completely incompatible. Favoritism is giving glory to someone in a way that is inappropriate for a follower of the Lord of glory.

James give an example of what was happening. A rich or important man enters the assembly. He bore every mark of wealth. He wears a gold ring, like members of upper-class Rome. Some of your versions translate “fine clothing” as “shining clothing.” In fact the word used to describe the clothes is “lampros” from which we get lamp. One commentator thinks that description fits the clothing Roman Senators wore. So a rich man would enter some sort of Christian assembly and was singled out for special attention. He would be politely conducted to his seat.

But then someone else with shabby clothes enters. He is told to “stand over there.” Or if he must sit, “go sit on the floor” or “close to my footstool.” James seems to describe ushers and their attitudes which were okay with most others in the church.

Those who display that attitude reveal something totally incompatible with Christian faith.

James goes on to explain this in verse 4 giving us a second wrong of favoritism.

Wrong # 2: It reveals a judgmental attitude with divided or evil thoughts. Verse 4: “Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts.” The word for discriminate is diakrino – judging through. James uses the same word in chapter 1, verse 6. Didkperonfros – a man whose allegiance wavers, it refers to one who lives in an inner conflict between trust and distrust of God. Here it refers to a double minded approach to visitors. Improver division of visitors traces back to the improper divisions in the mind. So not only have these Christians taken on the role of judges, they have rendered a decision based on un-Christian worldly standards. They are judges with evil thoughts.

James gives us another reason why favoritism is wrong in the next verse.

Wrong # 3: It goes contrary to God’s way. (5) God showed no favoritism based on external appearance. In fact, He reached out to

those the world would consider unfavorable. Verse 5 again. “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?”

Now this is not saying that every single poor person has God’s favor and every single rich person is evil. But James makes clear that preferential treatment of the rich, beautiful, powerful and influential stands in stark contrast to God’s attitude. Apparently these Christians experienced some sort of oppression at the hands of the rich. Somehow they exploited them and dragged them into court. It is likely this referred to putting pressure on the poor in matters like debt, rent, wages and interest.

How did the poor Christians respond when they saw their wealthy landlord or senator come to church? “Sit over here in honored spot.” After all, there was this twisted notion that if you were wealthy, it automatically meant God favored you. Remember the rich young ruler who came to ask Jesus “what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?” Matthew 19. Jesus goes through all the commandments. The ruler says “I’ve kept all those.” Then Jesus says, “There is one

more thing. Sell everything you have. Give it to the poor and come follow me.” The rich young ruler turns away because Jesus has just exposed his real God.

Then Jesus says, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” What do the disciples say? “Amen to that Jesus. Yah, you nailed it there Lord.” No. “The disciples were amazed and then cried, “then who can be saved?” “Lord we thought if anyone was going to heaven it was the rich. We thought wealth was a sure sign of your approval. And now you say ‘how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven?’ Who then can be saved?’” Perhaps this belief is reflected in the approach taken to rich visitors in their assembly. But James corrects that. It’s not how much money you have, or how you look. It’s whether or not you’ve put your faith in Christ; rich or poor; black or white; male or female it’s Christ that matters.

God’s way in approaching people is totally different. He doesn’t let external appearance blind him. God’s people are to imitate him in this way.

- Deuteronomy 10:17-18 (NKJV)

17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God,

mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe.

18 He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.

- Leviticus 19:15 – “You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great.”

James gives another reason why favoritism is wrong in verse 9.

Wrong # 4: It is sinful and law breaking. (9) “But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted as a lawbreaker.” Discriminating against people whether on the basis of dress, nationality, social class or race is a clear violation of the unbounded love to which Jesus calls us.

We or James’ readers might think, “well its really no big deal. I don’t murder. I haven’t done one of the big sins. So if I harbor a little favoritism or racism or sexism, what’s the big deal?” Verses 10-11 shatter that argument. If we break the law on this one, we are lawbreakers. We can’t claim to be perfect law keepers if we keep most of the law. Bible commentator Douglas Moo, (who I’ll be studying under in just over weeks) writes, “As long as the law is viewed as simply a series of individual commandments, it’s possible to think that disobedience of a particular commandment incurred guilt for that commandment only. But the individual commandments are all

components of one indivisible whole, because they reflect the will of one Lawgiver. To violate one commandment is to disobey God himself and to render a person guilty before him. A failure to love the poor—a failure demonstrated by showing favoritism toward the rich—undercuts the whole intent of the law and places one under condemnation as a transgressor of the law.”

James finishes his argument against favoritism in verse 13.

Anyone who shows favoritism and does not repent of it will face judgment without mercy for those actions. **Result: It will result in judgment without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.**

Verse 13 states, “judgment without mercy will shown to anyone who has not been merciful.” Now I’ve said in the past that I believe Judgment Day will be a great day for Christians. I am not clear about the actual mechanics of that day. It is clear there will be a judgment of faith. Those who trusted Christ will enter into eternal life with God.

But Scripture also talks about a testing of our works. Start **something** don’t take it lightly.

1 Corinthians 3:12-15 states 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 NIV

¹² “If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.”

So our works will face some sort of judgment. James could be referring to this when he says “judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.” Any work that was done with favoritism will be burned up in some way. It will not be worthy of a reward. If James’ readers continue to discriminate, they place themselves in danger of facing a harsh judgment.

God forbids favoritism, racism, sexism and anything else where we judge someone based on a few external observations. I prided myself on my tolerance for all. I hated racism growing up. I couldn’t stand it when I heard slurs and jokes on the playground or in

the locker room. I remember when people of Indian and Pakistani descent first immigrated to Canada. I heard all kinds of slurs and jokes including my time at church. I thought I've got this area covered.

But a few years ago, God exposed an area of favoritism in my heart. I realized that whenever I saw a person from this group, I labeled them and made immediate judgments about them. I painted them with an unfair brush that I had been taught, heard and concluded. God confronted me with how wrong that was.

I don't want us to get into the debate about immigrants and what they should or shouldn't be required to do as Canadian citizen. There are valid arguments and questions all over the place. Simply to raise them does not necessarily imply racism. In some circles there has almost been a reverse racism. But to immediately conclude or make judgments based on externals is wrong in God's eyes. God through James lays out these reasons why God forbids favoritism. But then He shows us God's alternative – favoring fairness.

What's God's alternative to favoritism?

This is God's favoring fairness plan. **Fulfill the royal law – love your neighbor as yourself. (8)** Instead of favoritism, fulfill the royal

law. Treat everyone as you'd want to be treated if you were a poor man walking into a new place. Ignore the externals and see beyond what's outside. We need to do that with Goth youth and people with crazy hair and multiple body piercings and tattoos everywhere.

I read an article awhile ago on Goth culture. The front page of this magazine had a picture of a hard core Goth youth. I have to admit, at first, I could hardly look at them. The picture was so dark and their appearance so shocking. But I love the author's take on this in a section called "Responding to Goths." "Christian, do not be unsettled by how the goth person appears. The dark clothing often reveals a friendly spirit. The more extreme goth styles may be off putting to some, but it is important to see the goth as a person first. Showing distaste for their appearance only confirms to Goths their suspicion that Christians dislike them or fear them. Like anyone else, Goths want to be treated respectfully."

Love your neighbor as yourself. That's the Royal Law.

Speak and act as those who are judged under the law of liberty. Law of freedom – Old Testament, others explained and altered by Jesus. (12) Now there is a big debate about what that

means. John 8:36 – So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. Romans 8:2 – Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. Romans 8:15 – For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry “Abba, Father.” Galatians 5:13 – You my brothers were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.

I think then that the Law of liberty means we live free from the reign of sin in our lives. *It is not freedom from obedience, but freedom to obey.* Now with Christ in our lives, we have freedom to live out our faith away from the reign of sin. We are now free to break away from the chains of favoritism. We are free to say no to an accepted racism within our family. We are free to honor the Lord by reaching out to that scary looking teenager while other parents clutch their children to shoo them away. I think that’s getting closer to what James might mean here. Its not a complete freedom from God. It is freedom under God’s grace and holy, life giving law.

The last part of God’s favoring fairness plan is found in verse 13.

Show mercy instead of judgment. (13) Be quick to reach out in mercy rather than pull away in a judgmental attitude. It doesn’t mean we give up discernment. It does mean we give up favoritism. When we offer mercy instead of being judgmental, we might experience some of the triumph found in verse 13. God rejoices in being able to overcome His judgment with His mercy. If you have ever responded in mercy to someone who was easy to judge, you too might have tasted some of that triumph. I think that’s what the audience tasted when Susan Boyle sang for Britain’s Got Talent.

How might we respond?

Receive God’s mercy.

We cannot perfectly fulfill this call in our own strength. It is not possible for us to “really keep the royal law” on our own. We are lawbreakers. We have all broken at least one component of the law. We are all accountable to God’s moral law; we are convicted by the

law; we need someone to rescue us from lawbreaking. We need someone to pay that account.

That's what God did in sending Christ. He paid the price. He atoned for our lawbreaking. On the cross, He took the wrath of God we deserved. So if you are still in your sins; if you have not personally trusted Christ to atone for your sins, what are you waiting for? What holds you back? Put your trust in Him now and He will come in. God will immediately forgive your sins and clothe you with Christ's righteousness. He will see you as one covered by Christ. You can begin that journey of the forgiven.

If you've already received God's mercy, Praise Him for it.

God reached out and showed his loving mercy to us regardless of our talents, looks, bank accounts, bellies and hair. Rejoice that God's mercy was shown to you. That's one reason I love Psalm 15. It asks the question "who can approach God's holy hill?" Of the 11 answers given to that question, not one has to do with external appearance.

Ask Him to expose and root out any favoritism in our lives.

Will you friend, stop for a moment- and ask the Lord if you harbor and ungodly favoritism in your heart? **Pour our God's mercy to all others.**

Susan Boyle dreamed a dream of becoming a professional singer. It seems to be coming true in spite of her appearance. God dreamed a dream that His people would show no favoritism and embrace fairness. But not only dreamed it, He provided His Son so we could live it out. May God continue His work among the people of SVBC so that we are known as a people who shun favoritism and show mercy.