INSIDE OUT
PART 3: FAVORITISM

As we continue our study of the book of James, we come to a passage of scripture where the author addresses favoritism or partiality, specifically among believers. The Jewish believers came from a background where an unhealthy degree of respect for leaders and those in positions of power was the norm. It was part of their nature to show partiality. James doesn’t let that stop him from addressing it, though.

> Read James 2.1–4.

James starts by telling us to not show favoritism of any kind. He then gives a very specific example about a rich man and a poor man coming into their meetings and being treated completely differently. The rich man is shown preference while the poor man is excluded and dismissed. The point he makes is that favoritism contradicts Christian living. As believers, we cannot show partiality and be Christ-like at the same time.

Reading this passage today, it’s easy to skim over and not recognize it as something we need to deal with in our lives. The idea of a man wearing a bunch of gold rings and a flowing robe coming into our church doesn’t seem to fit our day and age. But if we think instead about how we classify people by social status or our cultural obsession with celebrities, we can get the idea.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we can identify instances where we’ve either given someone preferential treatment just because of their social status, or excluded someone because they don’t fit our social standards. Human nature tells us to exclude, shield and guard ourselves and our social groups from these people. This is discrimination—a way of showing favoritism.

QUESTION: How do you show favoritism? When have you given someone preferential treatment because of their social or economic status? When have you excluded someone that didn’t “fit in”?

People constantly separate others into groups by economic class, social status or other categories. The world is dependent on social structure and there will always be some people who are treated better while other people are treated worse. But as Christians who have accepted a new way of life, we should understand that we can’t live that way.
Read James 2.5–7.

In this passage James gives one reason why we shouldn’t be partial: because God Himself is impartial. God wants us to strive to be rich in faith and to be around people who are rich in faith rather than striving for earthly riches and being around people who are rich. He is impartial to that stuff.

A quick look at Jesus’ lineage shows us that God views people differently than we do. In general society, many of the people on that list would be considered lower class or non-elite: Rahab was a prostitute; Ruth wasn’t Jewish; David was merely a shepherd boy; Leah was the unloved wife that Jacob was tricked into marrying; etc. (See Matthew 1) But God is absolutely and totally impartial. He looks and deals with the soul and the heart. He deals with people from the inside out. He is “the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.” (Deuteronomy 10.17)

The early church fathers dealt with this issue of partiality as well. In Acts 10 Peter was reluctant to go and visit a Gentile commander. God sent him a vision to show that there are no differences anymore. He’ll accept anyone, in any nation, of any background that seeks, fears and follows Him! In Colossians Paul says, “anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.” Peter and Paul dealt with the issue of favoritism mostly in regards to salvation—God is not partial when it comes to who can be a part of His family.

Read James 2.8–13.

Here, James gives another reason not to show favoritism. He says that to show partiality is a sin no matter what form it takes. When we stand before the Righteous Judge, God Himself, how do we want to be judged? Do we want to be judged based on our works, our economic class or our social status? Or do we want to be judged with mercy? James says that the royal law is to love others. The opposite is to show favoritism (which is a sin). If we break one part of the law, we’re guilty of breaking all of it. Jesus taught on this as well.

Read Matthew 5.7, 7.1–2.

God extended mercy to us first so in turn we need to extend mercy to others.

QUESTION: How have you seen God’s mercy in your life? What does it look like to extend mercy to others?

What is it that causes us to show favoritism in the first place? Why do certain people wow us and cause us to treat them better than others? Why do we try to be around certain groups of people? The root of it all is want. We want to feel significant and important. We want more than we have. We are rarely content. Many times we treat people better based off of the desire that they have the resources to meet our wants. They have the connections to help us move up the social ladder.

If we truly found our significance in the Lord, we wouldn’t feel the need to constantly elevate people to areas they shouldn’t be. We wouldn’t see a social ladder and thus wouldn’t feel like we needed to exclude certain people or impress other people. If we learned to be 100% content and satisfied in the Lord, we wouldn’t struggle with showing favoritism. “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4.7)
If we learned to be 100% content and satisfied in the Lord, we wouldn’t struggle with showing favoritism.

Question: What desires have caused you to show favoritism? What can we do to more completely find our significance in the Lord?