

James 2:1-9
Playing Favorites and Playing Games with God

Main idea: God loves all people, and commands us to do the same.

I really enjoy playing games with my kids. From time to time, we'll get out the chess board, or some other board game, and we'll just play for an hour or two. It's tons of fun!

We play one game called Pandemic in which all the players work together to find cures for the world's diseases, and then rescue the world from a global pandemic. If only it were that easy, amen?

And, of course, an important part of learning how to play the game is to read and understand the rules. The rules give us parameters so that we can all enjoy playing the game. And when we all play by the rules, and work together, we all have fun, and we all win.

But what if, every time we played the game, I cheated? Or what if I changed the rules so that they all lose, and only I win? That wouldn't be very much for my kids, would it? And it wouldn't be fair to them. And even if I bragged afterwards and told everyone, "I won! I won! Look how great I am!" it would be a lie, because we weren't actually playing by the rules at all.

I think sometimes we treat our relationship with God the same way. We play games with God in which we try to cheat.¹ We like to convince ourselves that we're being faithful, when all we've done is change the rules.² We want all the rewards of obedience, without actually obeying God.³

That's what the Pharisees did in the New Testament. They sought to obey the letter of the law, but completely ignored the spirit of the law, which was to love people.⁴

But when we do that, I think we've forgotten that God doesn't make rules to take away our joy, but actually to increase our joy as we follow and obey Jesus.⁵

James 2:1.

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. (James 2:1)

Lord Jesus, You are the Lord of glory. Help us have a faith in You that shows everyone in the world Your glory. In Your glorious name we pray, Amen.

Partiality is another word for favoritism. And James simply says, "My brothers, show no partiality." In fact, James immediately tells us why. "Show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." In other words, how can we possibly play favorites on earth, when our Lord Jesus is so much greater and glorious?

¹ Galatians 6:7-8. We can't cheat God. He will not be mocked.

² 2 Timothy 2:13

³ Deuteronomy 28. The Jews were told EXACTLY what would happen if they disobeyed God, yet they expected God to bless them when they weren't faithful.

⁴ Matthew 23:23. The letter of the law is not unimportant, but the more important matters are justice, mercy, and faith.

⁵ John 10:10. Jesus came to give us life!

That would be like going to Disneyland, and just hanging out in the hotel the whole time. I mean, I'm sure the hotel is great and all, but you're missing the best part! And when we pick earthly things as our favorites, we're missing Jesus, who is the most glorious.

And yet, it's tempting to show favoritism. We naturally tend to show special attention to people we think will help us, or at the very least not hurt us in some way. We spend more time with people who make us feel good. We invite people to our homes and out to eat who can reciprocate. But it's completely inconsistent with who we are in Christ, and who we serve as Christians.

Because when it comes down to it, we're not to show favoritism because God doesn't show favoritism. Deuteronomy 10:17 says:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. (Deuteronomy 10:17)

Which is eye-opening for all of us who have tried to bribe God into getting us out of a bad situation. God doesn't take bribes. And Romans 2:11 also says it very clearly:

God shows no partiality. (Romans 2:11)

Which is interesting, because the context of Romans 2 is that we're all equally guilty before God. Jew or Gentile, gay or straight, evil or what we would often call righteous, when in fact there are none who are righteous. We're all guilty because we've all broken God's commands. And God doesn't show partiality. So we are all guilty, deserving of death and hell.

And we're probably all guilty even in this one area, in the area of favoritism.

A pastor named Steve Wagers told this illustration. A journalist for the New York Times wrote about an experience he had on a crowded bus. When he got on the bus, he saw only one empty seat, which was at the back of the bus, and he immediately knew why it was unoccupied. It was next to a homeless man with long, filthy hair who was breathing heavily. He didn't look at all dangerous, just tired. So the journalist sat down by him.

At the next bus stop, an elderly woman also got on the bus. As she walked the length of the bus toward the back, no one offered her their seat, so the journalist stood and motioned that she could take his seat. But the elderly woman replied loudly, not caring who heard, "No, I don't want to sit there, next to him."

Maybe you understand where the elderly woman was coming from, and you wouldn't take the seat either. Or maybe you're appalled at her insensitivity, and you're disgusted that this kind of thing happens. But, what if I told you that this kind of thing happens every Sunday in churches all over the world?

In fact, it's been happening for thousands of years. That's the exact situation that James was writing about in our passage this morning. Verse 2.

For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:2-4)

So the example that James gives when condemning favoritism is the place where it ought to be true that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, because we're all one in Christ Jesus. If that's true anywhere, it ought to be true when we're gathered as a church, and yet the church hour is still one of the most segregated hours in America.

In the year 2000, Abby and I attended a church for a little while where Kurt Warner was a member. In case you know less about football than I do, which is almost impossible, Kurt Warner played for the St. Louis Rams. We were sitting somewhere towards the back, but Kurt Warner always sat in the very front. I remember the week after the Rams won the Super Bowl, the pastor told Kurt to hold up his hand so that everyone could see his Super Bowl ring. And sure enough, even from the back of the church, I could see that massive Super Bowl ring on his finger.

Now, I really don't fault that church at all, because I don't know if they reserved a seat for Kurt Warner or not. I don't think they did. That's just where he preferred to sit. But whenever I read this passage of Scripture, I always think about that church service.

James tells us plainly, "If a man wearing a gold ring or nice clothes comes into church, don't show special attention to him."

If we show special attention to people who seem to have money because they can give more to the church, that would be wrong. That's one reason I have no idea what people give to the church, and I don't want to know. I don't want to be tempted to show special attention to anyone because of how much money they give. Everyone needs to know that God loves them, rich or poor, so everyone deserves for us to preach the gospel to them and point them to Jesus as the only One who can save us from our sins.

And if we hesitate to share the gospel with someone because of their social or economic status, consider the last line of verse 4. James writes, if you do any of these things, "have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

Even our thoughts can be evil. Maybe you don't have a problem with showing favoritism based on money, but maybe you do when it comes to race, or gender, or political affiliation. Maybe knowing just one thing about someone can cause you to make assumptions about them, so that you judge them with evil thoughts. We've all done this. And more than likely, we all continue to do this.

In the last year, it's been ridiculous! People have judged others based on whether or not they wore a piece of cloth over their face. They've judged one another based on whether they worship online or in person. They've judged each other sometimes based on nothing more than their silence on an issue.

So I don't think it's a stretch to say that we've all become judges with evil thoughts. It's so hard to battle our tendencies to judge people based on stereotypes and past experiences. But if we want to glorify God, then we need to begin to see people as God sees them. Verse 5.

Listen, my beloved brothers, 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. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? (James 2:5-7)

Once again, James frames the discussion in terms of rich and poor, but we could really expand it to include other distinctions that we make.

James is saying, “Hey, you’ve been thinking about this all wrong!” God doesn’t choose the rich, He chooses the poor. God doesn’t call the equipped, He equips the called. God doesn’t save the righteous, He saves sinners. Sinners like you. Sinners like me. Sinners like the people you often judge because they’re different from you.

Why does God do that? Why doesn’t God just choose the best of the best? People with the most power, or the most money, or the best talents and abilities? The people who we think would give the most and make the biggest impact on the world for His glory? I used to pray for a particular person to be saved because of how talented they were. I would tell God, “God, if you save this person, then they’ll really have an impact on Your kingdom.” Why doesn’t God just choose them? Well, I think it’s because if God did that, they wouldn’t really be glorifying Him; they would be glorifying themselves.

Paul said it like this in 1 Corinthians 1:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:25-29)

Do you think you have any reason to boast before God or others? Maybe you don’t think you have a leg to stand on before God, but when you compare yourself to others, you think, “Hey, I ain’t so bad.” And maybe that’s reflected in how you conduct your business, or how you choose your friends, or even how you treat those people who you might consider to be your enemies. Do you think that you’re better than them?

Verse 8.

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (James 2:8-9)

In other words, stop playing games with God. If you call Him, “Lord,” then do what He says. Really love your neighbor.

You know, we come to church week after week, but how are you loving your neighbor? How are you showing them the love of Christ?

When Jesus was asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told a story about a Jew who was beat up and left for dead on the side of the road. And it was a Samaritan, who typically didn’t get along with Jews, who helped the Jewish man and took care of him.⁶ So your neighbor includes the person that you typically don’t like, and don’t get along with. And the Bible commands us to love that person by meeting their needs.

But we don’t like that rule, do we? So it’s interesting how we naturally try to cheat or change the rule, convincing ourselves that we’re obeying the command by spending time with our friends and helping them,

⁶ Luke 10:29-37

playing favorites. And by doing so, we might even think to ourselves, “I won! I won! Look how great I am!” But it would be a lie, because we weren’t actually playing by the rules at all.

Maybe you naturally love and gravitate toward spending time with people like you. But God calls you to love, spend time with, and serve people who are very much not like you.

In John 14, when Jesus was invited to a party, He said to the man who invited Him:

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. (Luke 14:12b-14a)

I wonder how many Christians today, myself included, have been ignoring this command. How often do we throw parties and only invite our friends? How often do we help people, but only those people who can help us back? I mean, even our church services, which are kind of like a party in which we sing songs and celebrate Jesus, they’re mostly almost always made up of people we already know, and already love, and already love us. But what if, instead, we invited the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, everyone our society pushes aside, and THEN, Jesus says, we’ll be blessed.

Because Jesus also said in Luke 6:

If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:32-36)

So loving your neighbor, according to Jesus, is best fulfilled by loving the people that we might consider to be our enemies. And loving your neighbor has less to do with saying we love them, and more to do with actually serving them, giving to them, and spending time with them. And that, Jesus says, is how we show ourselves as children of God, because it reflects His mercy to those who desperately need to receive His mercy, just as we ourselves have been shown God’s mercy. That’s how you love your neighbor as yourself.

This command is so important that James refers to it as the royal rule. Jesus referred to it as the second greatest commandment. I’d say that’s pretty important. In fact, it’s so important that when someone asked Him what the greatest commandment was, Jesus told the person, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind,” and then Jesus immediately followed that by saying, “But hey, don’t forget about the second greatest commandment either, because it’s like the first. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. All of the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”⁷

Showing favoritism breaks the command to love your neighbor, because you’ve put some neighbors ahead of other neighbors, and you get to be the judge of which neighbor to love.. And James writes that if you break this command, you’re convicted by the law as a transgressor.

⁷ Matthew 22:35-40

And the truth is, we're all convicted by the law as transgressors. We've all transgressed the law, which means that we're all sinners.⁸ But there's also good news. Jesus came to save sinners.⁹

And He came to save sinners without showing favoritism. Jesus didn't die just for the rich, or just for the poor. He didn't die just for Jews or just for Gentiles. He died for all sinners, which is all people.¹⁰

That means that He invites you to trust in Him. Stop playing games with God. Receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

⁸ Romans 3:23

⁹ 1 Timothy 1:15

¹⁰ John 3:16