

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for November 15: Treat everyone equally

November 2, 2009

I was serving one summer with a pastor who I respected greatly. We went out to visit two families new to the community. On the way back to the church building, I was disappointed to hear the pastor speak of the two families. He said, “That first family has tremendous talent and large resources. They can be of great benefit to our church. We must place a priority on reaching them.” Of the second family he said, “The other family is all right but will not help our church very much.”

I recall remembering this passage as the pastor spoke. Prejudice and discrimination exist sinfully even in churches and among Christians. How often do we fail to treat everyone equally? How often are we guilty of showing partiality? Do we show partiality based on what people can do for us?

Treat every person the same way (James 2:1-4)

James calls for the end to all favoritism, partiality, prejudice and snobbery—especially in the congregations of Christ. Many translations follow the NIV and its expression that because we are believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ we should not show favoritism. A possible translation would, however, understand James to emphasize, Jesus Christ who is the glorious Lord on Earth. This rendering follows the Old Testament use of the concept of God’s glory. James, under this understanding, transfers the “glory” to Jesus Christ.

James emphasizes that since his readers believe in the Lord Jesus Christ

who is the glorious presence of God on earth, they never should show partiality, favoritism or recognize any form of rank. The teaching restricts Christians, especially in worshipping congregations, from paying more attention to those who can contribute to the group than to those who need the aid of the congregation.

James uses one example of showing partiality—that of looking with favoritism on the rich over the poor. The word “your meeting” is the word “*synagogue*” and may refer to a Jewish synagogue. It could also refer to a religious meeting that is not a synagogue. James speaks of favoritism being given to one who comes with expensive clothing and a golden ring (that was a symbol of high rank). He shows the error of overlooking the destitute man who enters in soiled clothing. To say to the well-dressed man, take this good seat but to the poor man you must sit in this less desirable place is evidence of making discrimination and showing partiality.

Perhaps the persons to whom James is speaking are making the wrong judgment that wealth is a sign of God’s favor and poverty a sign of God’s disapproval. Appearance never should be more important than character. Believers in Jesus Christ will not discriminate or put down some groups of people as such behavior violates the law of love.

Pay attention to the needy (James 2:5-7)

Believers should pay attention to and care for the needy. God has demonstrated his concern for the poor by calling many of them to faith. God has given faith to those who are poor in the eyes of the world. The word “poor” in James primarily has an economic meaning, but it also can mean poor spiritually.

James accuses his readers of ignoring, dishonoring, insulting, humiliating and showing contempt for the poor. The rich people, according to James, are those who are exploiting the readers. These rich people domineer the

readers, they take the readers' property by legal means, they slander the noble name of Jesus Christ. Such behavior never must be expressed in a godly assembly or Christian group.

Do you think some people in your community might feel some prejudice or discrimination if they came to your church? Do we, by our attitudes, communicate to some they would not be welcome in our Christian fellowship? If so, James would say we have expressed discrimination, favoritism and partiality.

Overcome favoritism by loving action (James 2:8-13)

The way to correct any tendencies toward expressing favoritism or partiality is to follow the "Royal Law" of loving your neighbor as yourself. The word "royal" means coming from the king, and Jesus certainly underlined the importance of the law of love in Matthew 22:34-40. The Old Testament also expresses this law of love in Leviticus 19:18. The prophet Amos declares God's anger at those who treat the defenseless with injustice, who sell the poor for the price of shoes, who take bribes to inflict difficulty on the needy (4:1-2; 5:11-12; 8:4-6). Amos further declared God would pay no attention to the religious ceremonies until the people acted so that justice (fairness) can roll like a river (Amos 5:1-24).

The believer who acts lovingly toward others is doing well. Any who practice partiality and who dishonor the needy are committing sin and stand convicted as transgressors of God's will. One cannot keep just part of the law and be pleasing to God. One who is disobedient to any part of the law is guilty in every respect and liable to every punishment.

Christians should continue to speak and act as persons who will be judged by the law that gives freedom. We must know that for those who have shown no mercy to others, especially those in need, will have no mercy shown to them. With a tremendous ending to the passage, James declares

that mercy triumphs over judgment. The way to overcome the evils of partiality is by expressing the love of the kingdom.