October 10, 2010

# The Sin of Partiality

*Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James*

**James 2:1-13**

Pastor Bryan Clark

There's no question that, as a culture, we're all about the externals. It's about what you wear, what you drive, where you live, what your profession is. If you don't believe that's true, go back to a class reunion driving a 12-year old minivan and then go back to another one driving a brand new Lexus. See if it makes any difference to your classmates.

Last week we encouraged people to take off the mask. But one of the reasons that's so hard is because we live in a culture that's all about the external. We live in a culture that cares very little about heart, integrity, character. It's about the outside. It's about the show. It's the mask that matters in our culture.

A couple years ago I was in a men's clothing store and don't ask me which one because I'm not going to tell you. I was coming from a funeral so I was dressed in a full suit and looking about as pretty as I get and I got great attention, wonderful service. It was a great experience. I went back about six months later—it was on a Monday. I looked like this, which my family would say this is the real me, and it was a very different experience. I was treated rudely, couldn't get anybody to help me. It seemed like they couldn't wait to get me back out of their store. And I was reminded the exterior really does matter.

In our culture it's about the car you drive. It's about the clothes you wear. It's about the house you live in. It's about the money you make. It's about the show. Now I can't do anything to change the culture and neither can you. But when that value system bleeds into the church, then we have a problem.

That's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with me to James, Chapter 2. This particular week—just to mess with you a little bit—Mike decided to dress up; Bryan decided to dress down. But I'd still ask you the question: What difference does it make? Is my heart different? Is my character different? Is my integrity different? Is my passion for Jesus different? I just put on a different shirt this morning. Does that really make a difference? Well in our culture it does and it isn't just true of *our* culture; it was true two thousand years ago.

At the end of chapter 1, James encourages us to keep oneself unstained by the world, not to be polluted, not to be stained by the value system of this world. Now in chapter 2 he's going to unpack what he means by that. Chapter 2, Verse 1:

> **My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.** (*NASB, James 2:1)

**Personal favoritism** would just be distinctions on the basis of externals. That's what that word means. The idea of **...do not hold your faith...**we might translate...do not *mix* your faith. That's what the word means. In essence what he is saying is, "*Don't mix your faith in this glorious Lord*

*Jesus Christ,*" and that's basically a way of saying—the gospel of grace that ultimately focuses on Jesus and His glory—with the value system of the world that's all about externals. It's all about personal favoritism. The reason is because the two value systems are incompatible. They just do not mix.

In order to fully understand this, we need to back up a little bit and define some of our terms. When James talks about, "Do not be stained by the world; remain unstained by the world," the term *the world* is something we throw around all the time and it's really helpful to define it. I think biblically the best way to define it is to go to 1 John 2:16. We did this a couple of weeks ago in our minds and went back and reminded ourselves that John defines the world as "the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, boastful pride of life". He says, "This is the world—lust of the flesh." We talked about that word *lust*. That word lust is not talking about all different lusts but the core lust within us—that drive within us to be our own god. And so when we were talking about temptation we were talking about what ultimately appeals to the core temptation within us—the core lust within us to be our own god, to run our own show—convinced that life will be better if I'm in charge rather than God in charge.

When he says *lust of the flesh*, when he talks about the flesh he's talking about that which I can do apart from the Spirit of God. I can do it myself. So we go back to Genesis 2 and remind ourselves that we were created in the image of God to find our significance and our value in being rightly related to God, and out of that we live our lives. That's what God intended. You get to chapter 3, and sin enters into the picture. Adam and Eve are cut off from their relationship with God, which raises the question: Now if we're cut off from our source of significance and value, where does that come from? And the answer is that it comes from *myself*. I've decided to be my own god; therefore I am to make myself significant. I have to make myself valuable. So we do that on the basis of performance. On the basis of my performance then, I will make myself significant. I will demonstrate that I have value. That creates what we refer to as a performance-based value system. There's nothing wrong with performance. The problem is when performance becomes your means of significance, when it becomes your means of value, then you start to become an externally-focused person.

Now how do I measure my performance? It makes no sense for me to run a race if I'm the only one in the race. At the end of the race I win, but I don't know if I'm fast or slow. I have to have some point of comparison. That's the same thing when we talk about performance. There has to be some way in which I measure my performance. So it's measured against you. We're competitors. So life is defined by competition and comparison. I will determine my significance; I will determine my value based on how I compete with you and how I compare with you. That makes every day ultimately a very selfish drive in order to demonstrate that I can compete. I can outperform you. I have to! That's the source of my significance. That's the source of my value.

The performance-based value system ultimately leads to destruction. There are no winners. The reason is because, if I come out feeling good about myself, it's because I've compared myself with you and I think I'm better than you. That's why I feel significant. That's why I feel like I have value, which leads to the sin of arrogance, which is always destructive. That's what John says. "This world is all about lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, boastful pride of life." And then he says, "It ultimately leads to destruction." Or I compare myself with you and I don't compare well. Therefore my self esteem goes in the tanker, and that leads to destruction. It's a no-win system.

But when we're talking about competition and comparison and performance, there has to be some way in which we score the game. There has to be some way in which I put points on the scoreboard in order to know where I rank. That's what he means by the lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes. The *eyes* in both the Old and New Testament refer to covetousness—what I possess, my stuff. And basically the way that we put points on the scoreboard in our culture—and this has been true in most cultures—is by the stuff that we accumulate, by the externals. So in order for me to put points on the scoreboard, it matters what kind of a car I drive. It matters what kind of clothes I wear. It matters what kind of a house I live in. It matters what my title is, what my profession is, what my degrees are. You can process it for yourself. What are the things in this culture that we value that say you matter more than somebody else. Listen to the TV commercials. They admit it in half of the TV commercials. This is what you drive; this is what you wear; this is how you look if you're outperforming the rest of the field. So you have this concept in which a performance-based value system is scored by the externals. That defines the value system of this world. When the Bible talks about being *worldly* or *this world*, being *unstained by the world*, it's talking about rejecting that value system.

What's the alternative? The alternative is a value system of grace. When we trusted Christ as Savior, what we were saying in that is, "I can't do this myself. I cannot perform well enough. I can't merit favor with God. I can't save myself. I can't do this." Ultimately I accept that and believe that Jesus did for me on the cross what I could not do for myself. So the message of the gospel has, at its core, this brokenness, this humility that says, "Okay, I finally admit it. I can't perform well enough." Now it isn't the source of my value. It isn't the source of my significance. Therefore, in my brokenness, I invite Jesus to be my Savior. Having trusted Christ as Savior, my sins are forgiven, which now allows me to be reconciled into a relationship with God. Therefore, now I'm able to find my significance and my value in being rightly related to God. Now I'm all the way back to Genesis 2. That's what God intended. So my significance—my value—isn't rooted in my performance. It's rooted in my relationship with God, and you can't touch that. You can't change that. That doesn't go up and down day after day. It sets me free, I would contend, to actually perform better because no longer is my self esteem, no longer is my significance at risk. I'm free to live and fulfill the calling that God has given me.

Now over and over again in the New Testament we're reminded that we should live out of that economy of grace. If that's true, I'm no longer competing with you; I'm no longer comparing with you. For the first time in my life I'm actually free to love you because I don't feel the pressure of having to compete and compare with you. I can cheerlead your successes because now I've been set free from that performance-based value system. Therefore we should live that way.

When Paul's writing to the Corinthians and they are filled with arrogance he says, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you ask as if you didn't receive it?" In other words the economy of grace says there's no longer any reason to be arrogant. Arrogance is in direct contradiction to the concept of grace. I have nothing to be arrogant about. I didn't do anything. The only thing I did is admit I can't do anything and received what Jesus did on my behalf. To be an arrogant Christian is an oxymoron. We don't get it.

When Paul's talking to the Philippians, he said, "We should conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of our calling," meaning consistent with grace. He goes on then to say, "We should think of others as more important than ourselves." If we've died to this selfish, competitive, comparative value system, then it sets me free so that every day I don't have to think about myself and I can give myself away.

When Paul's writing to the Romans, after eleven chapters of the gospel of grace, chapter 12, "Therefore, on the basis of what you now believe to be true, you should not be conformed to this world (what he means *by* this world), but you should be transformed by the renewing of your mind." You should think differently. What does that mean? Verse 3: "By not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought to think." When we fully understand the economy of grace, it strips us of our arrogance; it strips us of our pride. It sets us free to genuinely love and celebrate one another.

Okay, take all of that back to what James is saying in Chapter 2, Verse 1. This is why our **...faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ....** the world *glorious* there is just to say: He's the star. When we trust in Christ as Savior, we recognize He's the star—nobody else. He's the glorious Lord Jesus Christ! If we believe that, then an attitude of personal favoritism, of partiality, of valuing people based on the externals is completely inconsistent with the value system of grace.

Then he gives us a little story to illustrate.

> **For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?**
>
> **(**James 2:2-4)

It's probably a situation that had played itself out in this church many a time. One interesting side note is the word translated **assembly** is the Greek word for *synagogue*. It reminds us that the early church met in lots of different places. Sometimes you hear people talk and it sounds like the only place the church met was in houses. That's just not true. They met in the synagogue; they met in the temple courtyard; they did meet in houses; they met in lots of places. There were lots of different ways to do church in the first century. In this case it appears they were meeting in the synagogue. A rich person comes in, gets preferential treatment. "*You come down here and you sit in the best seats."* The poor person comes in and, "*You go stand over there*." The translation is literally, "*You go stand under my footstool*." It kind of carries the idea that maybe you could *be* my footstool. It's a very disparaging remark. So you have the rich treated one way and you have the poor treated another way. They've clearly drawn distinctions of a person's value on the basis of externals.

Now the interesting question that James asks is**...have you not made distinctions among yourselves...**and he expects obviously an answer—yes. But then he says**...with evil motives**. One of the things that I think is interesting to process in this discussion is, "Why do we do that?" Obviously we're hoping to get something out of it. Why do they give preferential treatment to the rich? Are they hoping the rich will give them some of their riches? Or perhaps they can advocate for them—or they'd benefit in some way. I think all of us are processing where we struggle with areas of partiality and bias and wrestle with that question. Why do we do that? Why do we move with this social crowd? Why do we have *attitudes* about this group and we *embrace* this group? What's in it for us? What are we trying to get? What are the motives that are less than pure in why we do that? That's kind of what he's wrestling around with there.

**Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?**
(Vs. 5-7)

There's just a reminder that while they have dishonored and rejected the poor, God has *called* the poor to be part of His Kingdom—to inherit His Kingdom. In other words God loves these people; God values these people; Jesus died for them. Now he's certainly not saying God loves the poor more than he loves the rich. If that's the case then we're right back to partiality again or right back where we started. He's simply saying that those whom the culture devalues are the very people that God values, the very people that God honors, the very people that Jesus loves and died for.

Then he gives two illustrations that would have been prevalent in the first century. "*Why do you value the rich? Aren't they the ones that abuse you in court?"* In the first century the courts were very corrupt. If you had money you simply offered a bribe and you always got your way. So in a first century courtroom the poor stood absolutely no chance and everybody knew that. Money talks! Money talks today; money talked in the first century. So he's saying these are the very people that abuse you. Why do you value their value system?

The second one is talking about those who *"blaspheme the noble name of Christ".* I think the best way just to process both of these is to say, "Why do we value a value system that is so oppressive to people and that is so hurtful to people and that represents everything that we're opposed to." It's interesting in our culture, even as Christians, how many of us kind of buy into this way of thinking. We're willing to put up with a lot if someone has a lot of money, if somebody is some sort of a celebrity, if somebody's a great athlete. If somebody has the externals we're willing to overlook a lot of stuff that we're not willing to overlook in somebody that doesn't have the externals that the culture admires.

Now I think it's easy for all of us to think, *"Well we don't do that. We wouldn't treat people that way."* But I think it's important to realize we all do this. All of us have attitudes and opinions about certain people, certain professions, certain groups of people, and we show partiality based on externals. We immediately cast judgment on people. If I was dressed in a full suit and tie and looking my best, no question—if I went to certain restaurants and businesses—I would receive better treatment. But it's also true if I went to some other places in town I would immediately be resented and judged. Both are equally wrong. Everybody struggles with this issue.

In your own heart can you honestly say, if somebody pulls up in a Lexus and somebody pulls up in a 12-year old minivan, you don't notice that? Can you honestly say that you wouldn't be more excited to meet a college student who starts on the Husker football team versus a chemistry major that works at a coffee shop? Really, no difference? We do this all the time. I think the issue is understanding that everybody matters. To God they're equally valuable. We have to sort through the value system of the culture which is very, very hard.

I think it's also interesting to think about this text through the eyes of both the rich and the poor. Clearly the rich man was flaunting his stuff. He expected to be treated differently. He expected to be seated down front. For him I'm sure that was a way of life. He just had come to expect that. Those of you that have been successful, those of you that are in certain professions, those of you that have certain roles where this culture constantly bombards you with a message that you matter

more, over time that message starts to seep in. Honestly ask yourself, when you walk into a room, do you expect to be treated differently because of my profession, because of my money, because of my degree, because of my success? I'm going to guarantee, in the culture that matters, and over time we start to think that way. And when people don't treat us that way we get our feelings hurt; we get offended and we don't realize how tainted from the value system of this world we've become.

I would certainly be in a role like that. There are certain circles where I'm fussed over. There are certain circles where people respond to me differently. And to be honest with you, that feels good. That's the problem. It caters to a part of us that's not good. But you get enough of that and you start thinking, *"Well, yeah, I should be treated that way"*. Honestly, in your heart of hearts, when you walk into a room, how do you expect to be treated? How do you want people to think about you? When you sit on a team or a committee, do you think your opinion should be weighted more because you have a degree, because you're successful, because you have money, because you have this or you have that? I mean only you know that deep in your heart of hearts.

But I think it's equally true on the other end of the scale. There are people who feel like they're constantly judged—they're constantly devalued and nobody likes them— and they kind of take on this victim, this martyr role. And in every environment they're just waiting to be mistreated. They're just waiting to misread a comment or a look and say, "Here we go again. Everybody hates me. Everybody mistreats me. Poor me." It's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you want to look for that stuff, you can always find it, but in some ways you create that. You have your own problem. You have your own attitude. You have attitudes and judgments about people that aren't like you. That is just as much partiality as somebody else's.

Several years ago I had a couple of friends that had come out of the drug alcohol culture. They both had fought through addictions. Great stories! They'd come to faith in Christ, were growing significantly, but they did have a tendency to take on this kind of *victim* mindset and it would come out in lots of different ways. I remember one Sunday morning the message was about the story of the Good Samaritan and, afterward, we were kind of hanging out in the hallway. I was just kind of overhearing them talking and they were talking about all of the hypocrites—the religious hypocrites—that, just like those people in the story—like the priest—just walk on by and leave them by the side of the road. Finally it's one of their own that kind of comes down and grabs him and pulls him up and takes him to safety. And I said to them, "Hey, guys, you always imagine yourself being the victim and everybody else is the hypocrite." I said, "Has it ever dawned on you that maybe those people you resent are actually the victim and you're the hypocrite?"

I think some people get in that mindset. They're always the victim. Whenever they hear the story of the Good Samaritan they're always the person beat up on the road. It never dawns on them they're the hypocrite. Because of some of life's experiences, they resent other people; they resent other people's successes; they resent other people's money. They resent other people for a variety of reasons. Regardless of who you are, you struggle with this. We all do and it's very hard to respond correctly. What is correctly? Well, that's what James tells us. Verse 8:

> **If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well.**

This is the correct response—what's known as **the royal law.** And the reason it's the royal law is because it's king over all other laws. If we understood this one, we'd need no other commands.

This one covers them all. That's what Jesus said in the gospels—to love your neighbor as yourself, to understand everybody matters. Everybody matters to God and everybody is worthy of our love and compassion, regardless of the externals.

Over the years I found it interesting what we do to this verse. Usually the conversation goes like this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, so first I need to learn to love myself." "Really? (Laughter) Is that really the point?" I mean, "Come on, that's the problem. We all love ourselves way too much!" Even people struggling with poor self esteem, it's because they love themselves so much that they have such a poor self esteem. They don't think they're getting what they deserve. If we didn't love ourselves, we'd like it that we have a poor self esteem. The problem is we love ourselves way too much. If you spend the next two years trying to learn to love yourself, you will not love yourself *more*. If you spend two years with your face in the mirror, I guarantee you will not love yourself more. You will loathe yourself. The way to love yourself is to give yourself away. The way to love yourself is to stop thinking about yourself every moment of every day. The core of a grace-based value system is, "I've been set free from that selfishness. I don't have to make every moment of every day about myself. I can give myself away. I can genuinely love the people around me."

The core of this verse is to understand that I must *value* other people. When Jesus gave this royal law in the gospels, the response of the religious leaders was, "Hey, who is my neighbor?" And Jesus' answer was, "Anybody that needs your help." We genuinely love people. Verse 9:

> **But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, "DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY," also said, "DO NOT COMMIT MURDER." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.** (Vs. 9-11)

You get the sense that these people were saying, "It's no big deal. You know it's not like I've committed adultery or murder…really no big deal." And James is saying, "Hey, it *is* a big deal." In typical James fashion he doesn't beat around the bush. Partiality is sin. It's a violation of the royal law.

Think of it this way: Imagine the royal law is a balloon. You might say that adultery and murder are sixteen-penny nails. Partiality is a sewing needle. It doesn't really matter whichever one sticks the balloon; the balloon is equally popped. That's what he's trying to say. It's all woven together. At the end of the day, sin is sin, and partiality is not a little sin. To devalue the very people that God values is a problem. Verse 12:

> **So speak and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.**

**Law of liberty,** in James, is kind of a code name for this economy of grace, for the message of, "Jesus has set us free." We are going to be judged on the basis of how we have lived consistently with the message of grace that has set us free. Verse 13:

> **For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.**

Ultimately he's saying that we will be judged on the basis of how we have judged others. Now exactly how this works itself out I'm not sure. I'm not even convinced this is referring to some final judgment as much as it is just God's judgment and discipline through life. If you treat people like that, if you treat people by devaluing them and judging them, you probably can expect some life lessons from God to get you on track. If you extend mercy to others, you can expect mercy from God. I think that's ultimately what he's saying.

The sin of partiality is rampant in our culture. I don't see how to change that. It's rooted to the very core of our culture. But when it begins to bleed into the church, that's when it's a problem. For this to be an economy of grace, for this to be an environment of grace, we have to understand how the culture of the world affects our thinking and remain unstained by that and to love people the way Jesus loves people—free from external judgments—valuing people because God values people.

Each of us needs to process, "What does that mean for me?" If you walk out these doors and your mindset is, "*I hope those people were listening so they don't devalue me anymore*," (Laughter) you completely missed the point. You might as well have stayed home this morning. It's for each one of us to be responsible for that which we can control. That is, how do I view others? How do I value others? What makes an impression on me? For each one of us it's going to be different. Who is that person at work, who is that person at school, who is that person next door, who is that person around me that I have overvalued or devalued simply because of externals? We like to say we don't do this. Look at your social circles. Do you just move in social circles with people like you—wealthy people with wealthy people, middle-class with middle-class, lower-class with lower-class? If we don't do that, then what's up with that? We really need to give this some thought and figure out what would this look like for me to fulfill the royal law.

Becky Pippert tells a great story (this was years ago in the 70s) about a church in the Pacific Northwest that was very proper, very traditional, very buttoned-up. But they decided that they wanted to reach out onto the local college campus and you have to remember this is the 70s—you know the hippie movement and all that. And so they posted signs on the campus and, sure enough, there's a hippie that decides, "Hey, I'll give it a try." So he shows up late; the service is already in progress. Everybody is dressed to the hilt, except for him. He walks in the back, kind of a tie-dyed tee shirt on. He's got raggy bell-bottom jeans, no shoes, wild hair, probably could have bathed a little more often. He comes in the back of the church and begins looking around for a seat. There are no seats so he keeps working his way down the aisle, trying to find a seat. He gets all the way down to the front and by this time the tension is getting pretty noticeable. There is nowhere to sit so he just crosses his legs and plops down cross-legged in the middle of the aisle.

Well, by this time you can feel the tension. About that time one elderly pillar in the church stands up. He's got a cane and he begins to walk down the aisle toward the hippie. By this time the preacher has stopped; the service has come to a halt. You can feel the tension building. And, as Becky Pippert tells the story, everybody was processing. You can't blame this guy for what he's about to do. How could he possibly understand someone coming into the church and acting like this and behaving in this way? And you really just can't blame him for what he feels like he needs to do. The tension is building. He finally gets to the hippie sitting cross-legged in the aisle and, to everybody's surprise, he drops his cane to the floor. With all of the strength he has, he crosses his legs and he plops down on the floor next to the hippie—so he would not have to worship alone. As Becky Pippert tells the story, that was the sermon that everybody remembered that day.

For this to be a true economy of grace, a true environment of grace, if the masks are really going to come off, we have to understand that partiality is a sin. Judging and assessing people's values on the basis of externals is sinful. It's offensive to God. This needs to be a place where people are valued because they matter to God. Whatever your story, whatever your stuff, whatever your externals—nobody over-valued, nobody devalued. "*Just love our neighbor as ourselves!"*

*Our Father, we are thankful for the truth of Your Word. Lord, I think we'd all like to think we don't do this, but we know that we do. Lord, the message of the culture is so strong. Lord, I pray for each one of us that we would process in our own hearts what this would mean for us to be free of partiality and to love people as You love people. Lord, no matter who it is, when they walk through these doors, they would have a sense these people genuinely love me. Lord, may that be true of us. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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# The Sin of Partiality

***Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James***

James 2:1-13

Pastor Bryan Clark

## Opening Discussion

1. What are the ways in which you see favoritism played out in our culture?

2. Can you honestly say you don't discriminate between people on the basis of external standards?

3. What motivates our tendency towards favoritism?

## Bible Study

1. Read James 2:1-7. What is the problem James is addressing? Why is this attitude inconsistent with the message of the Gospel?

2. In what ways do we see this same scenario James describes played out in our culture today? Where have you experienced this personally?

3. How have you seen this play out in churches? What other externals might be the cause of this favoritism besides money?

4. Read James 2:8-13. What is the royal law? Compare Luke 10:25-37.

5. What makes this a “big” sin? How should we then live?

6. Religion breeds partiality. A quick read of the Gospels makes this abundantly clear. Why is this?

## Application

1. All of us have been on both the receiving end and giving end of favoritism. Sometimes our experiences of being treated unfairly are what in turn cause us to do the same to others. Do you think that’s true? Can you cite an example?

2. Who are the people you struggle with? Who do you devalue on the basis of externals? Who do you favor on the basis of the world’s value system?

3. What three practical steps can you take to address the sin of partiality in your own life?


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