**O Brother - Week 2 - Favoritism**

**Series Big Idea:** James, the half brother of Jesus, shares wisdom on how to overcome challenges that can trip us up as Christ-followers and keep us from from growing to maturity.

**Message Big Idea**: Loving all people as ourselves is a mark of maturity.

**Scripture:** James 2:1-13

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**Introduction: Favorite Child**

How many of you grew up with siblings? Anyone have more than 3 siblings? More than 4? More than 5? *(Keep going until you find out the highest number.)*

Whether you grew up with one sibling or *(name the highest number)*, one question plagues everyone who grew up with siblings: *Who is the favorite?*

Everyone knows parents aren’t supposed to have favorites, but chances are you and your siblings are pretty confident that you know who is the favorite, right?

* How many of you would say you are the favorite?
* How many of you are middle children? Yeah, tough break because everyone knows middle children are never the favorite. ☺
* How many of you are only children? Well, congratulations! You are definitely the favorite!

**Series Recap**

Today we are continuing our series “O Brother” during which we’re going through the book of James, a guy who happens to be the half brother of Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary. Imagine having to grow up with Jesus as your brother! No wonder James wrote about favoritism. I can hear Mary now: *“James, why can’t you be more like your older brother?”* I’m sure Jesus always finished his peas and helped with the dishes. The miracles probably didn’t hurt his case either. James, on the other hand, what a bum!

In all seriousness though, Jesus may have cast a long shadow in the family, but that doesn’t mean little brother James didn’t do some big things himself. In fact, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and is rightly considered a pillar of the early church.

The book that bears his name is a letter James wrote to Christ-followers who had been scattered throughout the region around Jerusalem while fleeing persecution. It was his desire to see people flourish in their faith, *(“…so that you might be mature and complete…” –James 1:4)* becoming “mature and complete, lacking nothing.” James warns of a number of potential pitfalls that can stunt the maturity of any Christ-follower. During this series, we’re taking a look at five of these pitfalls, and today we’re addressing this one: favoritism.

**Word: James 2:1-13**

James doesn’t waste any time getting right to the point. Let’s get started in James 2.

***“My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.” – James 2:1***

That’s pretty direct! The word for *(highlight)* “**favoritism**” James uses here is actually a compound of two words: “**to receive**” and “**to face**.” It’s literally rendered “**to receive somebody’s face**,” as in, to receive someone at face value. James is talking about making superficial and snap judgments, and he’s clearly saying: Don’t do that! Favoritism doesn’t just judge a book by its cover; it shows preference for certain kinds of covers. James continues:

***“Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If 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,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” -James 2:2-4***

I can be quick to give myself a pass here. I think, *“Of course I don’t do this. I would never tell a poor man to sit at my feet!”* The problem is that my favoritism and discrimination are much subtler and typically not something I consciously perceive.

If we’re being honest, we all do this. We all make superficial and snap judgments about people based on limited information. To demonstrate this, let’s watch this photography experiment. Six different photographers were asked to capture the essence of a man by taking his portrait, and this is what happened.

**Video: Decoy – A Portrait Session with a Twist**

*This is an “Improved” option for this talk that adds 2 minutes to the 25 minute message.*

*(James 2:2-4)* The snap judgments we make about people influence how we see them, and often influence how we treat them. We all have certain biases that cause us to choose certain people over others. What makes this so tough is these biases are often unconscious. We don’t wake up in the morning saying, *“Make sure you make snap judgments about people today based on limited information and only show preference for the people you like, the people who are like you.”* Instead, our past experiences build filters that process the people around us based upon whatever superficial information is at hand, and our unconscious bias then influences how we treat them.

In James’ situation, people were discriminating based on wealth, but there are lots of areas where we are prone to do the same thing.

We make tons of distinctions based on **Appearance**. Beauty is everything in our world. We make judgments about people based on how they look, how they dress, how they carry themselves. We unconsciously determine whether people are smart, happy, or safe to be around simply based on their appearance.

We judge people based upon their *(add)* **Race**, nationality, or ethnic background. It’s important for us to take a step back and try to realize the times we’ve overtly or even subconsciously favored certain people or certain groups. If you want to take an honest look at yourself with this, look at your closest friends and ask yourself: *“Do I have a tendency to only get close to people who look like me?”*

We discriminate based on *(add)* **Age** – We make judgments based on people being too young or too old. Certain ages can only do certain things. Think about it…Who wants a super young doctor, right? Don’t touch me Doogie Howser! I need someone with more experience. At the same time, how many older workers get passed over when applying for jobs? They are often judged by their age, not their ability.

We make judgments based on perceived *(add)* **Success** – Our society gushes over the winners and forgets the losers. From grade school all the way up there’s a drive not to belong to the loser crowd. We judge people by their economic status. We can gravitate toward people that have money or resent them for the very same reason. We’re more sly in America about placing people in classes based on wealth than they were in James’ day, but we certainly still do it.

All of us are prone to snap judgments and intentional or unintentional discrimination.

I (Jason) remember once, while I was serving as a pastor in downstate Illinois, an unconscious bias I had toward elderly people was totally blown out of the water. It wasn't that I had anything against this group of people per se, but I rarely, if ever, would go out of my way to spend time with them. I generally assumed that while wise, they were so out of touch with what was going on that they wouldn't be interested in me just as much as I wasn't interested in them. After all, this was a group of people that frequently had arguments with the church about whether it was okay to have drums in worship.

Then one day out of nowhere, the oldest person in our church, a lady named Zella, asked my wife and I if we wanted to go to the movies with her. Say what?! Old people go to the movies? So on a Thursday night, we went to the movies with a 90-year-old lady and ended up having a fantastic time. Here's the funny part. After dinner and a movie, we walk out of the theater, and Zella looked at us and said, *"When I was young, after the movie we'd go out to get sodas or ice cream."* It was at that moment I realized that my wife and I, being in our early 20's, had just been out lasted by a 90-year-old. I was tired! All I wanted to do was go home and go to bed! I still can't believe I had to tell her no... *”Zella, we're tired and have to work in the morning!”* The moral? Thanks to Zella reaching out first, my unconscious bias toward old people took a giant leap toward the positive.

As James continues this warning about the potential pitfall of favoritism, he says:

***“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘You shall not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.” – James 2:8-11***

Next to “loving God,” Jesus said that “loving your neighbor as yourself” is the greatest commandment, and here James reminds us that showing favoritism stands in sharp contrast to this command. According to James, breaking one part of the law makes us guilty of all of it. You know he means business when he starts throwing around sins like adultery and murder in the same conversation as favoritism.

Author NT Wright sheds some insight on this saying:

**“...the law is like a sheet of glass: if it's broken, it's broken. It's no good saying it's only a little bit broken. A sheet of glass can no more be only partly broken than a car tire can be only partly flat. If it's flat, it's flat.” –N.T. Wright**

I have a tendency to let myself off the hook here. Favoritism doesn’t seem so bad, right? At least it’s not murder! But there’s one more piece James adds. Read the next verse with me:

***“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” – James 2:12-13***

Speak and act with freedom. The thing that vexes me about my favoritism and even the subtle unconscious biases in my life is what they take from me. It’s the opposite of freedom.

* How many people do I miss out on knowing because I’ve automatically dismissed them?
* How many beautiful experiences do I miss because my favoritism prevents relational connections from ever getting off the ground?
* How is my own growth and maturity stunted because I don’t move beyond the familiar?

*This is a costly sin*. It robs me of my liberty and binds me to the conventions of society. It has me sifting relationships based purely on what I stand to gain on the surface. Why should stereotypes and discrimination tell me who my friends should be and who I worship alongside?

**Jesus as Our Model**

But let me pause here: I have a concern. My concern is that it feels like I’m challenging you to **NOT** to do something rather than to **DO** something. The obvious take-away here is **NOT** to show favoritism, right? Not to treat anyone better than another based on superficial matters. But it seems like I’m asking you to score half a touch down or to stop halfway between 3rd base and home plate. So I say we take this a big step further, and instead of challenging one another to **NOT** to show favoritism, let’s challenge each other to show **FAVOR** – to everyone! Rather than working so hard NOT to show favoritism, what if we asked God to help us to be just and impartial and to show FAVOR to everyone!

A first step toward showing favor is to **ACKNOWLEDGE** that EVERYONE is a child of God. Everyone! Every single person you and I come across – no matter their color, age, gender, economic status, religion or sexual orientation. ... everyone bears the image of God. *(Genesis 1:26)* All are created in the image of our Heavenly Father. And because every person is created in the image of God, every person is of priceless value to Him, and need to acknowledge that value.

Then, once we acknowledge someone's value as a person created in the image of God, we can go a step further to *(add)* **APPRECIATE** their uniqueness that contributes to the mosaic that is God's creation. Even if we don't understand or agree with someone, we can appreciate (and be grateful) that the world is not all just like me. Same-ness might make our existence easier and less conflicted, but oh, how boring that would be . . . if everyone was like me.

And finally after we **ACKNOWLEDGE** someone as bearing the very image of our Heavenly Father and we **APPRECIATE** their unique contribution to God's creation, then we can *(add)* **AFFIRM** the gifts, talents, and qualities they offer the world. God created the world and humankind to live in perfect harmony with him and each other – that was his dream for our world. Sadly, ever since Adam and Eve chose a dream of their own rather than God’s dream, we have drifted toward being fearful or threatened by those who are different from us. We focus on all sorts of differences: **behaviors**, **beliefs**, **appearances**, **education**, **incomes**, **ages**, and even **mental** and / or **physical abilities**. There is so much focus on what divides us because of our differences.

Yet, when we begin to ACKNOWLEDGE that despite all our differences, we all – young, old, big, small, educated, uneducated, republican, democrat, black, white, and everything in between – we all reflect the image of God, we can begin to celebrate or AFFIRM our “differences” as a blessing that help us gain a deeper APPRECIATION for God and each other.

And we have a model who showed us how to live this way. Jesus never showed favoritism, but Jesus always showed favor. Over and over again, throughout his ministry, Jesus showed favor.

* When the crowds wanted to stone a woman for her behavior, Jesus said, ***“He that is without sin can cast the first stone.”*** **-John 8:7**
* When his disciples tried to keep children away from him because no one considered them worthy of his attention, Jesus said, ***“Let the children come to me, for the kingdom belongs to such as these.”*** **-Matthew 19:14**
* When the religious elite accused him of eating with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus said, ***“For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.” –Luke 5:32***

Jesus showed favor all right. You know who Jesus favored? Anyone and everyone who bore the image of his heavenly Father; that’s who Jesus favored.

*(Slide with 3 As)* So when I see someone with a physical disability, I may immediately think this is a "broken" individual, rather than **ACKNOWLEDGE** that at his core, he is as much a reflection of God as I am.  And as a reflection of God, I will **APPRECIATE** that he has the same longings and desires in life as I do, but he probably has to work 10 times harder to get those things. And it’s then that I can **AFFIRM** his resilience to face his challenges, his grace in the midst of discrimination, and his brilliance that often gets overlooked.

So, let me ask you: Who are the people in your world who are often overlooked or marginalized? The ones who are rarely shown favor? Who are the ones who rarely if ever get acknowledged for all sorts of reasons?

* How about the person who speaks in broken English?
* What about the person driving your Uber or Lyft? Or the person who waited on your table last night?
* I’m thinking of the person who isn’t dressed as nicely or whose car is in obvious need of repair.

What would it look like for us to go out of our way to acknowledge them, and then to go beyond that to express appreciation for them and what they are trying to do, affirming them as individuals created in the image of God? Imagine the impact we could have if we as a community of people intentionally went out of our way to acknowledge, appreciate, and affirm – actually showing favor to anyone and everyone who crosses our path every single day?

**Conclusion: Acts 2:1-11**

I mentioned earlier that God’s dream for our world is that we would live and love in perfect harmony – that we would love each other not based on status or skin color or ability. Rather we would love one another because we are all created in his image.

God’s dream for his church – you and me, is that we would restore that dream. Just before Jesus left this earth he said, **“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.”** And the Spirit came. His Spirit was so evident in his church that *(Acts 2:9-11)* an amazingly diverse group of people came together all speaking of the wonders of Jesus in their own language. Look at this list from Acts chapter 2… a diverse group of people all joined together praising God.

There was no favoritism, but all kinds of favor. And what made the difference? If we back up a few verses we read this:

***“Everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit.” -Acts 2:4***

This is so important for us: when the Holy Spirit is present and active, everyone is united. There is no favoritism, but all kinds of favor.

I believe our world is desperately wanting to see this: a people who show no favoritism, but lavishly offer favor to anyone and everyone they meet. James says:

***“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.” –James 2:8***

Let us be a people who do right. People who are so filled with God’s Spirit that the world will see his loving image in and through us as we show favor to everyone***.***

**Communion Idea**

The early church would include the celebration of the Lord’s Supper as part of a larger meal. And apparently, some people in the Corinthian Church were guilty of favoritism - not sharing their meal with those in need and as a result some were going hungry. They were actually missing the whole point of the meal.

So the Apostle Pauls says, ***“That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ,[***[***h***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=I+Corinthians+11&version=NLT#fen-NLT-28590h)***]****(the people you who join you at the table)* ***you are eating and drinking God’s judgment upon yourself.”*** Paul is saying that there can be no favoritism at this table, only favor – God’s favor through Jesus. So as we eat the bread and drink the cup today, use this as a time to let God’s Spirit go to work on you – examining your own actions, and showing you where you need to resist showing favoritism and instead show favor.