

PANDERING TO PARTIALITY

Jas 2:1-13

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 02.02.03

Philosophers—those individuals who think hard, ask tough questions, and offer answers about the nature of reality and the meaning of life. One of my most-admired philosophers is Dr. Seuss. And one of my favorite stories is “The Sneetches.” A Sneetch is a yellow bird-like creature; they resemble Big Bird of Sesame Street without the feathers. Here’s how the story goes.¹

Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches
Had bellies with stars.
The Plain-Belly Sneetches
Had none upon thars.

Those stars weren’t so big. They were really so small
You might think such a thing wouldn’t matter at all.

But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetchs
Would brag, “We’re the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches.”
With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they’d snort
“We’ll have nothing to do with the Plain-belly sort!”
And whenever they met some, when they were out walking,
They’d hike right on past them without even talking. . . .

[Well, the Star-Belly Sneetches will have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly
Sneetches, and they exclude them from all their fun activities. As a result, the
Plain-Belly Sneetches . . .]

Were moping and doping alone on the beaches,
Just sitting there wishing their bellies had stars . . .

[Along comes Sylvester McMonkey McBean, and he has a machine that, for three
dollars, will put a star on the belly. So, the Plain-Belly Sneetches pay three bucks
a piece and become Star-Belly Sneetches. . . .]

Then they yelled at the ones who had stars at the start,
“We’re exactly like you! You can’t tell us apart.
We’re all just the same, now, you snooty old smarties!
And now we can go to your frankfurter parties.”

¹Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (Random House, 1953, 1954, 1961.)

“Good grief!” groaned the ones who had stars at the first.
“We’re *still* the best Sneetches and they are the worst.
But, now, how in the world will we know,” they all frowned,
“If which kind is what, or the other way round?”

[Sylvester McMonkey McBean, being quite a clever critter, offers for ten dollars each to remove the stars from the bellies of the Star-Belly Sneetches. They shell out ten bucks a piece and take a trip through the “Star-Off Machine.” . . .]
Then, with snoots in the air, they paraded about
And they opened their beaks and they let out a shout,
“We know who is who! Now there isn’t a doubt.
The best kind of Sneetches are Sneetches without!”

[As you can probably guess, things soon turn into a horrible mess. Stars on, stars off, stars on, stars off . . . until neither the Star-Bellies or Plain-Bellies knew who was who or who was what. . . .]
Then, when every last cent
Of their money was spent,
The Fix-it-Up Chappie [McBean] packed up
And he went.

And he laughed as he drove
In his car up the beach,
“They never will learn.
No. You can’t teach a Sneetch!”

But McBean was quite wrong. I’m quite happy to say
That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day,
The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches
And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.
That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars
And whether they had one, or not, upon thars.

The Sneetches—we chuckle at the silliness and stupidity of their pride and prejudice. And yet, we as human beings find that we ourselves often pander to partiality. *When we bow down to the god of social status, the silly story of the Sneetches becomes a sinful reality among humans.* This is exactly what was happening among the Christians to whom James wrote.

The Letter of James, chapter two, forms a single argument concerning the necessity of putting faith into practice. These twenty-six verses speak of two related forms of incompatibility: vv. 1-13—the incompatibility between faith and favoritism; vv. 14-26—the incompatibility between faith and indifference. This morning, we want to focus on vv. 1-13 and face up to its message that pandering to partiality is wrong. Favoritism is sinful: we cannot combine faith in Christ with the worship of social status. *According to James,*

how we behave toward people indicates what we really believe about Christ. In the words of D. L. Moody (1837-1899), “Every Bible should be bound in shoe leather.” Here at the Plymouth Church of Christ, our stated passion and purpose is: “Loving Others As Jesus Loves Us.” I believe James would praise this desire, but I also believe he would point out that our love for others either declares or denies our love for Jesus. We seek to love others as Jesus loves us, and our love for others shows our love for Jesus. We are now ready for the first seven verses of James chapter two.

¹My brothers [and sisters], as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. ³If 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,” ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, my dear brothers [and sisters]: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? (Jas 2:1-7, NIV).

Several particulars about this passage are not clear. Is James describing a hypothetical scenario or an actual situation? Is the meeting a worship assembly or a judicial assembly (that is, a gathering for deciding disputes²)? Are the two people who enter the assembly non-Christians or Christians? The poor who will inherit the kingdom—are they poor in money or are they the “poor in spirit”³ or perhaps a combination of both? And what are the implications of this as it relates to God favoring the poor? Regardless of how these questions are answered, the point of the passage is very clear: v. 4—“Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” The term James uses—translated by the NIV “discriminated among yourselves”—this term could also mean that they are divided within themselves, even as they make discriminations among themselves; in other words, they are double-minded (and he has already condemned double-mindedness in 1:7-8). And by implying that they are corrupt judges, James calls to mind Lev 19:15 where judges are forbidden to

²Cf. 1 Cor 6:4-6.

³Cf. Matt 5:3.

discriminate between the rich and poor on the basis of appearance, but are to decide cases impartially. Furthermore, James sharpens his attack by showing that the practice of his readers contradicts not only God's perspective of the rich and poor, but also contradicts their own experience. James' condemnation of these double-minded Christians could not have been more precise. They have gathered in the name of Jesus, who proclaimed the poor to be blessed. They are a community that is itself oppressed by the rich. Yet when a poor person enters the assembly, they act toward a community member the same way the rich act toward them!

Now, let's read vv. 8-13.

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹²Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! (Jas 2:8-13, NIV).

The command "Love your neighbor as yourself" is drawn from Lev 19:18, just three verses after the prohibition of partiality in 19:15. *For James, favoritism violates the demand of love for one's neighbor.* V. 10, with its statement that a person who fails in one commandment is liable for the whole law must be understood in its context. The person who claims to live by the law of love, yet practices the partiality that the law of love itself forbids has broken the law of love entirely. The reason for this, James argues, is that transgression is not against a "commandment" but against the lawgiver. The same God forbade both murder and adultery. Therefore, if one avoids adultery but commits murder, that individual has still disobeyed God. James sees sin not so much as the violation of the letter of the law as it is a violation of the Lord of the law. Sin is more than disregarding the letter of the law; it is disobeying the Lord who gave the law. *James is boldly and bluntly telling his readers that in their showing of favoritism on the basis of appearance, they have completely missed the meaning of the law of love.* Finally, James reminds these double-minded Christians that they too will be judged, and that those who

have not shown mercy will not be shown mercy.⁴

Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of the Indian nationalist movement against British rule and considered the father of his country, is highly-esteemed far and wide for his doctrine of nonviolence to achieve political and social progress. In his autobiography,⁵ he says that in his student days he was very-much interested in the Bible. Deeply touched by reading the Gospels, he seriously considered becoming a Christian, since Christianity seemed to offer the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. One Sunday, he went to a nearby church to attend worship services. He decided to see the minister and ask for instruction in the way of salvation and for enlightenment on other doctrines. But when he entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go and worship with his own people. Gandhi left and never came back. “If Christians have caste differences also,” he said to himself, “I might as well remain a Hindu.”

The problem of partiality is still with us. I must confess that I have not personally heard of a situation exactly like that described by James, but I am aware of situations where wealthy Christians have influenced the decisions of elders with their checkbooks and, in so doing, have been granted the power to direct the church’s affairs. I think I know what James would say about that, and I think all of you know too.

“Loving Others As Jesus Loves Us.” Wonderful words to live by; after all, it is the royal law of love. The other side of the coin is that our loving of others is the measure of our love for Jesus. It was Jesus Himself who said, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt 25:40).

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⁴In effect, James flip-flops Jesus’ beatitude in Matt 5:7.

⁵Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Dover, 1983).

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