

James 2:1-10, 14-18

**“All or Nothing”**

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18B)

September 8, 2024

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

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

If partiality is your “pet sin” – *a sin you rationalize in keeping* – today’s Epistle may not be what you wanted to hear. If you’re not sure if partiality is your pet sin, this has been a recurring sin for God’s people from time immemorial.

A few weeks ago, we heard about this sin. Seven hundred years before the incarnation of Christ, ***“The Lord said: ‘Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, while their hearts are far from Me’”*** (Isaiah 29:13). This sin of partiality remained a problem during Christ’s first coming. For He also said, ***“Well did Isaiah prophecy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men”*** (Mark 7:6-8).

So, what exactly is this sin of partiality? Partiality is favoritism. Typically, it’s never a smart idea to play favorites. Because whenever we play favorites, we are creating competition. You see, playing favorites based on outward appearances is the way of the fallen world. Now, the character and will of God starkly excludes partiality. God is one who condemns such action among people. This lack of partiality of Jesus was known by the Pharisees, even when they were plotting against Him. For they said to Jesus: ***“Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances”*** (Matthew 22:16).

Even if the Pharisees were plotting against Jesus, their summation was true. For Christ never said, ***“It’s true that you are a sinner, but you are a little sinner compared to that other guy who is a murderer. That murderer is a really bad sinner. I don’t care about small sins.”*** You see, before God, all sins are damnable. So, if you are guilty of one part, you are guilty of it all. But at the same time, all are also justified freely by God’s grace.

The problem is that we are not like God. However, we are to grow up into Him by being made holy through His Word and Sacraments. So, how do we see this sin of partiality in our lives? Well, do you ever feel “split”? Do you ever find yourself trying to rationalize your personal views when they come in conflict with Biblical teachings? Do your Christian convictions only apply to a small part of your life? Sadly, for many Christians, Biblical convictions are rapidly shrinking.

What I am about to say may offend you, and if it does, repent and ask Jesus for forgiveness for your sin of partiality. And as it always goes, God’s Law afflicts the comfortable while also God’s forgiveness comforts the afflicted.

So, some examples of this sin of partiality are the following:

- “I know Jesus taught forgiveness, but what if ...”
- “I know abortion is murder, but what about when...”
- “I know marriage is a union of one man and one woman, but what about...”
- “I know my Christian convictions should inform my vote, but what if...”

Partiality is when a Christian strips the Bible of the things they don’t like, and all that remains is a butchered book of what once was the Bible. Partiality is the Gospel, according to you. Partiality inevitably leads to a religion you’ve invented yourself.

Jesus gave everything of Himself to us, so why do we struggle in remaining loyal to Him? Like God’s people of Isaiah’s time and in the time of Jesus’ ministry, too many Christians only honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him! Our modern world tears us apart as we are taught to separate our lives into independent sectors: education is education, politics is politics, science is science, and on, and on, and on. Our secular society – *this fallen world* – claims so much as “political,” but most often, it’s not, it’s spiritual. Remember, we are caught in a cosmic battle that we cannot see between good and evil, between God and Satan.

We are coerced into becoming partial Christians. And Jesus does not want only a part of us. Jesus doesn’t want split personalities. He doesn’t want us to be a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He wants all of us! In Luke 14, Jesus speaks of this saying, ***“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. ... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be My disciple”*** (Luke 14:26-27, 33).

As poor, miserable sinners, we have become partial people. For good or bad, we care how people look, dress, and speak. We even tend to divide people by age and skin pigmentation. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, James teaches us that any partiality has no place in God's kingdom. Included in this sin of partiality are racism, quotas, and DEI: "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion."

The fallen world convinces us that quotas and DEI are good, but they actually promote the division of people, and as Christians, we should have no part of this. Again, the Holy Spirit inspires James to say, "***My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory***" (James 2:1).

To this sin of partiality, James reminds us of the Second Table of God's Law: "***You shall love your neighbor as yourself***" (James 2:8). And if we remember and live by the Ten Commandments, we are doing well. But if we revert into following the world, by showing partiality to our sinful nature, we are committing sin and are convicted by the Law as transgressors (James 2:9).

However, this sin of partiality doesn't just stop here. You see, what is really going on with this sin, like all sins, is a faith issue. James writes, "***What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?***" (James 2:14). That is a good question. This brings us right back to partiality. Here, we have faith put at odds with works.

As I said last week, Satan and his demons certainly believe in Jesus. So, simply saying that you believe in Jesus will not save you. Simply having the knowledge of Jesus does not save. This is what James is speaking about. He is discussing a false understanding of faith. A "faith" that is just mere knowledge – *or just a claim* – that "faith" has no effect on the person who has it. Faith is no passing matter. I hope this is not your faith! You see, faith itself cannot be seen. Faith is only known by its presence through proper confession and natural works.

So, if a person declares that he has "faith," but his "works" do not belong to such a faith, that person has no such true faith. So, if a person says, "I am a devout Christian," and even attends weekly church services, but lives as heathen the rest of the week, is that faith able to save him? Well, what does Jesus say? He says: "***You will recognize them by their fruits. ... A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits***" (Matthew 7:16, 18-20).

So, the absence of good works that flow from faith in Christ show that this “faith” is not genuine. This person has a false faith. He has the same faith as that of a demon, who certainly believes in Jesus, but will not cling to Jesus and follow Him.

So, without the inescapable evidence – *the good works that inevitably emerge and accompany a genuine faith that grasps the Gospel of Christ alone for forgiveness, life, and salvation* – then what good is that kind of “faith”? Faith with no evidence is a false, and dead faith. So, never let anyone offer you the comforting lie that such a false and dead faith counts for anything. In fact, in the end, such a dead, good-works-absent “faith” will be of no benefit to you.

You see, such a dead “faith” is simply not compatible with our new identity in Christ, which was bestowed on you at the Baptismal font, where, by divine grace, you became a child of God, and a brother or sister of the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, a dead, inactive faith disavows the unity of Christ’s living body. Such a false and dead faith cannot stand up to the judgment of God, because once the Law is broken at one point, it is broken in all points.

So, how do we, as poor, miserable sinners, protect ourselves from the sin of partiality? How do we become a whole Christian?

Well, we can only become whole through Christ who nourishes us with His Word. As He nourishes us with His holy Word and His blessed Sacraments, we become more like Him as He changes our hearts and our minds. For He is the Vine, and we are the branches and ***“whoever abides in [Christ] and [He] in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from [Christ we] can do nothing”*** (John 15:5).

It is only through Christ’s nourishment that our faith produces fruits of good works. Through Christ’s Means of Grace, your faith becomes living and active as we actually show our faith through our hearts, mouths, and hands and all in concert. As we grow in faith, we better follow Christ as our pattern of God’s grace and love and mercy to others. Just as Christ showed no partiality, we become like Him in showing no partiality. We look at every human being, even unbelievers, as fellow people who have been purchased by Jesus through His blood shed on the cross. Being forgiven, and with God’s help, we live our lives whole as we cling to Jesus and serve our neighbor in repentance and true faith. So, let us show no partiality as we hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen. + SOLI DEO GLORIA +*