

A while back I read a book entitled *The Caleb Quest* by Mark Atterberry. Now Caleb was one of the twelve scouts that Moses sent into the Promised Land on a reconnaissance mission to check it out before the Israelites started to invade it. Ten of the scouts came back afraid stating that the cities were heavily fortified and that the people were giants. They instilled fear into the Israelites by stating that it would be impossible for them to conquer the land. But two of the scouts, Caleb and Joshua disagreed, and said that with the Lord's help they could conquer the land. Walking in faith was Caleb's quest.

Now I found the subject of one of the chapters in the book to be quite interesting and challenging. The author asked the question: "Does God have favorites?" Now that's an intriguing question. The author pointed out that throughout the Bible we find instances where God was drawn closer to certain individuals than others, and that God granted these individuals special privileges and blessings.

For example, who would dare to argue that God didn't have special feelings for Noah and his family when they sailed to safety in the ark while the rest of the world drowned? Didn't God have a special relationship with Abraham? Didn't God put a hedge of protection around Joseph when he was sold into slavery in Egypt? And then there's Job, where the devil accused God of putting a fence around Job and his household and everything he had. And didn't God see great potential in a humble shepherd boy named David by making this youngest son of Jesse King of Israel? And finally, what about Mary; didn't God favor her over all the other young Jewish girls in Judea by giving her the special privilege of being the mother of our Lord and Savior?

But isn't it natural to have favorites? Aren't there some people that we would rather hang out with than others; people who think like we do, like the same things, and treat us with love and respect? It's human nature to have favorites, people that we connect with better than others. And that's okay in our individual lives, but what about in the church? At a Relay for Life event years ago, Judy saw a T-shirt with the message: "Jesus Loves You, but I'm His favorite!" Let's look into this question as we continue our study of the Book of James this morning, and see what James has to tell the Early Church and us today about showing favoritism in the first thirteen verses of the second chapter.

Read James 2:1-13

So, if James tells us not to show favoritism, why did certain people in the Bible have special relationships with God? What did they have that the others didn't? What was unique about them? Genesis 6:8 tells us that Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. James 2:23 states that Abraham believed in the Lord, that it was credited to him as being righteous, and that he

was called a friend of God. 1 Samuel 16:13 states that the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power. And in Luke 1:28, the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she was highly favored by the Lord.

So, what was the difference between these people and others? Well, God found in each of these individuals a desire to know Him, to serve Him, and to love Him. Each of these individuals strived to walk closer with the Lord every day of their lives. They sought the Lord, and thus, found His favor. It's the same in human nature; the more time we spend with others, the closer we get.

But not only did they seek God, but He also sought them. He wanted a personal relationship with each one of them, and it is still His wish to have a personal relationship with all His children, with each one of us here this morning. His desire to re-establish the broken relationship with the human race was so strong that He sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on an old wooden cross on Calvary so that we all could be free from the bonds of sin and death forever. And there is no greater affirmation of this commitment than the words recorded by the Apostle John in John 3:16-17 – “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

God loves the world, the entire world; all its inhabitants, not just a few favorites or a select group or a particular denomination. A man arrives in heaven, St. Peter asks him: “Religion?” The man says: “Methodist.” St. Peter looks down at his list and says: “Go to Room 15, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.” Another man arrives at the Pearly Gates; Peter also asks him: “What’s your religion?” “Lutheran.” “Go to Room 18, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.” A third man arrives and Peter also asks him what his religion is. The man replies: “Presbyterian.” Peter tells him: “Go to Room 11, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8.” The man responds: “I understand there are different rooms for different denominations, but why must I be quiet when I pass Room 8?” To which Peter replies: “Well, the Baptists are in Room 8, and they think they’re the only ones up here.”

One of the best illustrations of God’s love for all His children is found in the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles when Peter enters the home of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion and a gentile, and witnesses Cornelius and his family receiving the Holy Spirit. Then in verse 34, Peter boldly declares: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men and women from every nation who fear Him and do what is right.” The *Message* adds this paraphrase: “God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from – if you want God and are ready to do as He says, the door is open.”

Through this experience Peter recognized an eternal fact that we often forget; that God's family is an inclusive family. There are no divisions or social levels based on race, age, gender, national origin, language, education, wealth, social status or other divisions that we see in our society today. As stated in Romans 2:11 – "For God does not show favoritism." God's family is open to "whosoever," whosoever believes in Him; whoever wants to know Him better and have a personal relationship with Him.

In God's family, the outsider is brought in. The word "Gentile" means little to us today. But to the first century Jew it represented the worst possible outsider. To the Jews at this time, there were two simple ethnic groups: "us" the Jews and "them" the Gentiles. Cornelius was a Gentile, one of "them," and Peter being a Jew was one of the "us." But on that eventful day, Peter saw that in God's eyes there is no "us" or "them;" we are all one in Jesus Christ.

Prior to going to Cornelius' house, Peter had a vision from God. Peter was staying at the home of Simon the tanner when he went up on the roof to pray before dinner. He fell asleep and in his dream, he saw a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds; all of which were considered unclean by Jews like Peter, and thus, were forbidden to be eaten. Then Peter heard the voice of the Lord telling him to get up, kill the animals and eat them. Peter responded by saying: "But Lord, I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." To which God replied: "Don't call anything that I have made unclean and impure." Remember as we discussed in the first chapter of James last Sunday, God is the author of every good and perfect gift; God does not make mistakes.

As you study the Bible, you see a transition in the relationship between God and us. For example, it appears that in the Old Testament God showed His favor on the nation of Israel and its people as a whole. This relationship with the corporate body of the Israelites was through certain individuals such as Moses, Samuel, Deborah, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and the other prophets. But then He sent His Son; when Jesus died on the cross the veil in the Temple was ripped from top to bottom signifying that God's love and grace are now available to all who will believe and seek Him. Because of this, all who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior can now have a personal relationship with God. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our relationship with God went from a distant one based on religious rituals and ceremonies to a personal, one-on-one interaction with the Lord.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul had to say about this in Galatians 3:26-28 – "You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And in Ephesians 4:4-5, Paul writes: "There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one

baptism; one God and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Thus, the ground at the foot of the cross is always level.

Because God’s love and grace are extended to all no matter who they are, we as Christians should never show favoritism or discriminate against others who may not look, dress or act as we do. However, we live in a world that is image driven; one that tends to judge people based on appearance. Our culture implies that your worth is determined by the kind of job you have, the kind of car you drive, the kind of house you live in, and the kind of clothes you wear.

An article appeared in *USA Today* about the experience of a construction company owner named John Barrier in Spokane, Washington. John had just come from a construction site and his clothes were dirty. He went to his bank to cash a \$100 check. When he tried to get his parking ticket validated, the teller refused, saying that he hadn’t conducted a transaction. “You have to make a deposit to get your parking slip validated,” she insisted. John told her that he had a large sum of money deposited in this bank, but she remained doubtful. He asked to see the manager, who also refused to validate the parking ticket. The next day, John came back to the bank and closed his account of over one million dollars. Do you think that someone was fired over this? How many times has our first impression of somebody been wrong?

Judging others on the basis of appearance instead of on the basis of the heart is contradictory to the character of God. Remember what God told Samuel when He chose David as King of Israel. God judges each one of us by what’s in our hearts, not how we look. In his illustration of giving the best seat to the rich man instead of the poor man, James is making it clear that a person’s value is not determined by their wealth or appearance. While prejudices and favoritism may be commonplace in the world around us, they have no place in the church.

In James’ illustration, the church member or usher is communicating that the poor person is really not welcome. I wonder if any of us secretly consider ourselves “superior to” others. There was a large urban church where everybody wore coats and ties and their best to church. One Sunday a young man with long hair and a beard wearing blue jeans, a trench coat, and boots entered the church. He walked right past the ushers and proceeded down the center aisle to front where he sat down on the floor. Of course, everyone was staring and started whispering to each other. About this time the head usher, a stately gentleman in a three piece suit came down the aisle. People started whispering: “Watch this; he’ll take care of this.” To everyone’s surprise, the usher sat down beside the young man and put his arm around him. He truly understood what James was talking about; we are all God’s children.

Now one of the places where we are all equal is at the communion rail. At the churches that I served in Grants and Socorro, we had the old traditional communion rails where you could kneel in prayer and receive the elements. Unfortunately, we don’t have that here, but Bruce

and Kent are working on some. At one of the churches, I took a long carpenter's level and placed it on the communion rail to illustrate that it was level; there were no high points; it was level all the way across. In addition, there's no special seating; all kneel or stand where they want to. There is no order as to who is served first and last. We all share from the same loaf of bread and from the same cup of salvation. And that's the way God intends for it to be. God does not have any favorites. As we sang earlier: one bread, one body, one Lord of all. God loves each and every one of us, and in turn, He expects us to treat each other with the same love that He has for each one of us.

A preacher was appointed to a small, struggling church. He began to visit and hand out information about the church trying to build it up. He went to local clubs, stores, homeless shelters, etc. When the church members heard about this, they gave him an ultimatum: either he stopped doing this or he would have to leave the church. They told him that they didn't want him going to places like that because some of those people might start coming to their church, and they didn't want them worshipping with them. As a result of his convictions, the pastor honored God and left the church. One of the subtle dangers in some churches is that they only cater to people that can help them, rather than those that they can help. They only want visitors who look like them, act like them and think like them. In God's eyes we are all equal and are all worthy of His love and grace. We must make sure that everybody who enters the doors of this church always feel welcome and right at home.

Now while God does not have favorites, He does have one desire and that is to have a personal relationship with each one of us. During Lent this year, accept His invitation; accept the outreached hand of the Lord and strengthen your personal relationship with Him. May we treat each person we meet as a brother and sister in Christ. May we look for the best in everybody we meet not only here in church, but especially in the world around us. In closing, remember God loves all of us and we are all His favorite! Amen