

Impartiality

Proverbs 22:1-8

James 2:1-10

Gilbert Keith Chesterton, G.K. Chesterton, was a British philosopher and author whose heyday was the first third of the 20th century. He called himself an Orthodox Christian, which meant he adhered to the traditions of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. He was also an early radio star on the BBC. Media critic Marshall McLuhan called him the originator of talk radio. Starting in 1931, three times a week Chesterton walked into the BBC studios, sat down in front of a microphone and started talking. He had a lightning-quick wit and was a deadly debater but his radio talks often covered spiritual topics. Winston Churchill studied not his delivery (Churchill was too proud to adopt another man's mannerisms), but his inerrant ability to speak to the hopes and fears of the nation. Chesterton also had a huge impact on the next generation of British Christian public figures, like C.S. Lewis.

Once, as Chesterton walked through the Notting Hill neighborhood of London with the great playwright Oscar Wilde, they heard women yelling at each other from open windows on the second floors of their flats, on opposite sides of the street. "They shall never agree," Chesterton immediately said. "Why not?" Wilde asked. Chesterton replied, "Because they argue from different premises."

This week I found myself in a conversation with a person whom I have known a long time. I like this person. This person likes me. We were having this discussion because Linda and I had gone to some effort to provide a meaningful service to a member of this person's family. But our talk ventured out onto the microscopically thin ice of COVID responses. Aware that anything I said might be perceived as coming from the window across the street, I tried to make a point with tact and at the same time, to change the subject. I failed in both cases. The other person did not yell at me, yet conveyed they thought I had no idea what I was talking about. Had I watched this video? Did I know the bias of my sources?

For the record, the answers are, no, I have not watched that video, and yes, I am aware of the bias of my sources. One critical question facing western culture today is, can we have genuine conversations with people who start from different premises? Or will we continue to slide down the slippery slope of partiality? Have our debates become so partisan that we no longer can hear, let alone honor, ideas and convictions which differ from our own? As we shall see in a few moments, these are not new questions. Yet our conversations have become more fraught, with an intense distaste that borders on contempt. The sight of a Trump flag curls this one's lips. Two others have felt it appropriate to steal the little yard signs we put out to advertise our acceptance of all genders and sexual orientations.

I am old enough to remember the Civil Rights and Viet Nam protests of the 1960's. I recall the violence, the screaming, the hatred on naked display during those

years. Today, in my estimation, we have retreated even deeper into our own tribes. Our own can do no wrong; our enemies can do no right. If we do not see as much shouting in the streets, we see far more in all forms of media: social, news, even entertainment. All forms of media, and with a vitriol not seen before.

To all of which the author of the Epistle of James says, “But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” The problem of partiality is as old as sinful human nature. James has given an example of partiality that differs from mine. He addresses the age-old tendency we have of deferring to the rich. I address the sociopolitical divide in our culture. No matter. The dynamics of partiality remain the same in each case. According to Merriam-Webster, partiality is “the baseless showing of preference for one over another.” The Westminster Theological Dictionary adds, “Partiality, in the New Testament sense, is less a problem of the preference shown, and more a problem of the impact that preference has on those not preferred.” Let us, as we say in the biz, “run the passage” to see what more we can learn about the problem of partiality.

James opens with the question of whether people who show partiality can really be followers of Jesus Christ. From the previous chapter we learn he knows of specific cases of partiality in the congregations to which he writes. He continues with the hypothetical example of rich people being shown to the best seats in the worship area, with footstools; while poor people must find their own seats at the feet of the rich. Commentators almost unanimously agree this is not actually a hypothetical—rich

people probably did get special treatment in the early church. Christianity spread most quickly among the poor. The churches were known to share food and to assist with housing. A person of means was a prize for any congregation struggling to stay afloat. Plus, there has always been a tendency to assume that all wealth is earned. We tend therefore to respect rich people perhaps rather more than some might deserve.

For the past few Sundays, as we worked our way through James 1, we stated that the central theme of this letter is “Do your faith.” Make it real. Now in the second chapter we find one of the first applications of this theme is to how we treat the rich and the poor. James insists our actions along these lines have spiritual consequences. Chapter two verse four reads, “have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” The words “distinctions” and “judges” are actually one Greek word with a prefix added the second time. “Distinctions”, also “discernment”, are spiritually helpful. The spiritual gift of discernment is the ability to tell the difference between godly and ungodly forces. But in the context of this letter these distinctions do damage, not good. Because once the churches make these particular distinctions, they show partiality to people whom they think can help them, and/or their congregations.

Yet verse six: “Is it not the rich who oppress you?” Sometimes the answer is yes. But sometimes the answer is no. There is a deeper principle at work here. The word translated as “oppressed” here means those who systematically use their leverage to deprive people of their rights. (See: Taliban. See: CIA.) To label every

person with wealth as that kind of oppressor is to engage in the very judgment James condemns. Discernment is an individual, case-by-case, activity. The person who is probably the richest among all I have known is also one of the most generous, most spiritual people I have ever encountered. So does James lie? Again, no. Power, whether wealth, or physical strength, or political pull, can corrupt. People rich in any way can intimidate and manipulate in ways not available to others. But not all do.

The meaningful question is, do they (do we, when we have riches of any kind) show partiality? If we or they do, we break the “royal law” James references in verse nine. This royal law refers not to some code created by kings and queens. It refers instead to the highest, the most important law. When asked what was the greatest commandment, how did Jesus respond? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” Do we love God and do we love our neighbors? None of us can answer yes to these questions without reservation. We show partiality. Therefore we fall under the condemnation in James 2:10: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” Unless we keep the whole law—and not one of us does—we are accountable. We are judged. We are condemned. We need Christ!

The Good News is that Jesus atoned for all our sins, including the sin of showing partiality. Praise God for that, because we cannot help ourselves. In the past few weeks I have heard—in my heart, in meetings, in personal conversations—people judging others with whom they disagree on a number of issues. But the hottest issue

in this church for several weeks now has been human sexuality and gender identity. I have listened to members of this church judge those with whom they disagree. And I have honestly, genuinely heard this from both conservative and progressive people. Every time it happens it grieves me. Every time. Please, allow me to stipulate that I am not perfect. I am not better than. And I am not asking us to stop talking. We must be able to have these conversations. Yet James is right. When we show partiality we encourage destructive behavior in others and we damage the spiritual well being of all.

But when we have the spiritual discipline not to condemn others we allow the Holy Spirit to work. Linda and I have attended three weddings this summer. Two of them involved blue collar folks. The other involved the whole gamut of American life. The bride's father recently purchased, for his boss, the drum kit on which Ringo Starr played during the Beatles' storied appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. It cost his boss millions. Meanwhile one of the bridesmaids' mothers is homeless. Another wore a headdress in keeping with her Muslim beliefs. The Census Bureau would qualify every single person in the other two wedding parties as Caucasian working poor.

As I read the scriptures this is how Christians are to live. We are not to care about skin color or bank balances or what flags we fly. We are instead to enter into relationship with God and with God's people. Without partiality. In closing allow me to issue this challenge: who has God placed in your path whom you have judged, yet whom you know you must love?