

“God’s Favorite Things”

There is a joke that I find very amusing because the butt of the joke is the tradition in which I was raised. The joke goes like this. A man died and went to heaven. He meets St. Peter who ushers him into heaven through The Pearly Gates and takes the man on a tour. The first place they stop there was a group of people sitting very still and attentive in a hall while a preacher proclaims the scripture. St. Peter says, “These are Presbyterians they are taken by the proclamation of the Word.” The second place they stop they see people singing as a procession dressed in white walking through their midst. St. Peter says these are Episcopalians. The liturgy defines their worship.” As they approached the next group St. Peter tells the man, “Shh. You must be incredibly quiet as we get closer.” In a hushed voice the man asked, “Why?” St. Peter replies, “They are Baptists. They think they are the only ones here.”

Another bit of church humor can be seen on t-shirts. In large letters it reads “Jesus Loves You.” Underneath in small letters it reads, “but I’m his favorite.”

Humor usually works because we recognize that there is truth in it. We all want to be Jesus’ favorite. We all want to think that we have latched onto the one true faith that will guarantee our place in heaven. Even atheists want to think they have gotten it right. They are convinced that when they die it will be lights out. Boy will they be surprised when they see the light drawing them into the other side.

We seem to want to have it locked down knowing that we are absolutely right about God. We also want to be right about who is with us in our rightness. Those who are not with us are anathema. They are not only anathema to us, but also to God. After all God is on our side. Needless to say, we are often wrong about that too.

However, St. James points out, “As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism,” for in showing favoritism “have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”¹ Guilty as charged. We look up and we look down and we look across the aisle and we see people to favor and people to disfavor wherever we look.

Royalty mesmerizes Americans. Think of how royal weddings have become viewing events. People rise during the middle of the night to see a royal wedding live on TV. We also buy keepsake magazines with the photos and inside stories of the wedding. We often do the same with celebrities who are our substitutes for kings, queens, princes, and princesses. They have wealth and prestige so we should favor them.

¹ James 2:1,4

Conversely, we see a homeless person on the streets asking for money and we look away. We are reluctant to give even our loose change to someone begging on the street or at a traffic light. We have become like the man in the silk suit in Bruce Hornsby's song who "catches the poor old lady's eye, and just for fun he says, 'get a job.'"² If someone is poor it is their fault, not our fault, not the system's fault, not just plain bad luck. They are hungry and homeless because they are lazy. Therefore, they deserve it, and we should not favor them.

Then there are the people across the aisle. They are in more or less the same boat as we are financially, or educationally, or by any other measure. Perhaps their car is nicer, or their spouse more attractive, their children smarter, but not by that much. Yet we question how can they be God's favorite? We know that they are breaking one of the Ten Commandments. We watch them pray and it does not seem genuine. We think she is a flirt. We think he does not take care of his parents. We gossip about them bearing false witness about something that is not our business. We set ourselves up as accuser, judge, and jury. Because we need to be God's favorite, we do our best to put others.

As an antidote to showing preference to the wealthy, the celebrity, or the attractive we decide we will do our best to replace that by doting on the poor and downtrodden. That may seem like a good motivation, but aren't we then showing favoritism to another group because of their social or financial situation?

God loves all people for all people are created in God's image. It can be a hard pill to swallow. How can the person who dresses that way, lives in that area, commits all those sins, votes for the wrong candidate, believes in the wrong religion, or believes in no religion or God at all be God's beloved much less God's favorite. It can be very annoying. Our ego wants to be assuaged. We want to be God's favorite and to be surrounded by those we think are also God's favorites, or almost as favorite as we are. So, we play favorites with others to ensure that we are among the elect.

But look at Jesus' life. He did not surround himself with elites or any kind—powerful politicians, military leaders, religious leaders, nor the wealthy. While he often taught and preached and healed among the poor, he did not turn away anyone who called on him. Think of Jairus the religious leader³, the centurion⁴, Nicodemus⁵, and a Royal official.⁶ While he may have performed much of his ministry among the poor, he did not ignore the privileged. While he may have challenged leaders in many ways, he did not show favoritism to the

²"The Way It Is" by Bruce Hornsby and the Range, released 1986 on RCA Records.

³ Mark 5:21-43 and Luke 8:40-56

⁴ Luke 7:2-10

⁵ John 3:1-21

⁶ John 4:42-54

powerful or to the poor. He loved all the same just as does the Father in heaven.

James, the brother of Jesus, affirms that in this letter.⁷ He then goes on to broaden his admonition in his most famous line of scripture, “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” It is not enough to have faith in Christ Jesus, we must strive as best we can to do as he did in his earthly ministry. That is, we are to care for the poor and outcast, but in our compassion, we are not to forget others. We are to show no favoritism. We are not to compare our situation to others. We are not to judge who is more favored or more important. We are to love and care for all equally just as Jesus does. Our ego does not like this. It wants to find its place in the pecking order of the world. But our ego is flawed, and Jesus’ teachings free us from it if we will follow.

Show no partiality to others. Disparage no one including yourself. We are not to find fault with others especially when the intent to make ourselves feel better about our weaknesses. Shame no one. Share what we have with others. Be kind. Judge not lest we too be judged. Forgive sins as our sins have been forgiven. Love our neighbors as ourselves. Those are the secrets of a good and fruitful life. Those are the keys to heaven.

⁷ James 2:1-17