

Lesson Five
THE TEST OF PARTIALITY OR FAVORITISM
2:1-13

In James 2:1-13 we are introduced to the fourth test of true Christian faith which gives evidence of the New Birth. It involves what is known as partiality or prejudice. It involves the practice of showing favoritism to people who have outward advantages, such as social importance, money or power. If it is put in the form of a question, it would be, "Do you ever treat a person differently because of how they look, how important they are, how much money they have, or how much money they don't have?"

One of the beauties of Christianity is that it is comprised of people from every sort of background and nation. The Apostle Paul rejoiced in this when he wrote in **Galatians 3:28**, "**There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond (slave) nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.**" While these differences do not cease entirely, nevertheless, within the fellowship of the church, they do not matter. Everyone is accepted as a brother or sister because all are equal members of the family of God. It is a natural thing when people of the same background and interests come together and form those relationships, but it is a "supernatural" thing when people with distinctions and differences can overcome those things and share a common bond of being "in Christ." There should be such a measure of harmony among the diverse people of God that this could not be explained in any other way than by the grace of God.

That churches are not more noted for this type of unity is to our shame as Christians, and reflects very poorly on our understanding of the gospel and its implications. James gives us an urgent call for re-evaluation of church life at this point.

I. THE PRINCIPLE OF PARTIALITY - v. 1

"My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons."

James writes to this readers as brethren in Christ, all members of the family of God. Those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ can look at other believers and say, "We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are family. We are blood related family. We are forever family." This is glorious only as we look upon the One who has adopted us into the family, and that is our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. It is to this family that James gives a stinging rebuke. Verse 1 might be paraphrased in this manner, "My brethren, do not attempt to hold and practice the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ while you are playing favorites with people." In other words, "stop being a religious snob!"

God's children are begotten by their Father to manifest a family likeness. Paul emphatically declares, "**there is no respect of persons with God.**" (**Romans 2:11**). We are to be like God in His moral character, and impartiality is one of the attributes of God.

The evil of discrimination was forbidden by God in the Mosaic Law. **Leviticus 19:15** says, "**thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty.**" Also in **Deuteronomy 1:17** we read, "**Ye shall not respect persons in judgment, but ye shall hear the small as**

well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's. Even the critics of Jesus recognized that He did not show favoritism. In **Luke 20:21**, they confessed that ***"neither accept thou the person of any, but teach the way of God truly."***

Simon Peter was guilty of racial bias against the Gentiles until God taught him his error by letting down a huge cloth full of unclean animals and commanded him to eat them. Peter concluded that ***"of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons."*** (Acts 10:34).

II. THE ILLUSTRATION OF PARTIALITY - vs. 2-4

For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that wears the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?"

James here gives an illustration of what might have happened in an assembly setting. The word ***"assembly"*** is synagogue, the term used to describe a Jewish congregation or group meeting for worship (**Matthew 4:23; Acts 17:1**). At the time when James wrote, the Jewish Christians apparently continued to speak of their place of assembly as their synagogue. Since in **James 5:14** the word, ***"church"*** is used, it seems that at this early date Jewish Christians made no sharp distinction between the two terms.

James describes two visitors who visit the services. That the early Christian meetings were open to the public is clear from **I Corinthians 14:23-25**. The visitors represent the two extremes of wealth and poverty. The illustration deals not with the spiritual or moral status of the visitors, but with their external appearance and the assembly's reaction to them.

The first act of favoritism occurs when the well dressed person is escorted to one of the "good seats". He is shown the highest respect. The second occurs when the poorly clad person is told to stand at the back or the side or else to sit on the floor beside the foot rest of someone. This is a double show of disrespect. The person who had a seat would not only refuse to give that seat to the poor visitor, they would not even permit him to sit on their footstool, or footrest.

James reproofs this attitude of partiality not only as being an act of discourtesy, but calls it a sin in the eyes of God (**James 2:9**). ***"If ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin."*** Both men should have been given a similar welcome into the service where they may have heard about a Savior who calls all men unto Himself regardless of their external circumstances in life. James charges these believers with setting themselves up as partial judges with ***"evil thoughts"*** or false standards of ethical conduct. These standards were not God's standards, but those of the world which they had practiced in their old lifestyle.

III. THE INCONSISTENCY OF PARTIALITY - vs. 5-7

“Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?”

James now gives an intense plea to “hearken” or listen to his Christian reasoning. The practice of partiality is not unimportant. Some Christians view faith and reason or logic as being incompatible, but the Bible never makes this distinction. God Himself says in **Isaiah 1:18**, ***“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”*** What the Bible does distinguish between, is the reasoning by the standards of the world, and the reasoning by the standards of God. Invariably, the believer who is opposed to reasoning, when it comes to the faith of Christ, will fail in applying the teachings of Christ to their daily lives. They end up applying the natural reasoning of the world to their lives. This is why they profess one thing and live another. Some are hypocrites, and others are just inconsistent and do not see the problem. This is what James is now addressing.

James proceeds to give three reasons why playing favorites is inconsistent with the Christian profession of faith.

A. It Is Inconsistent With God’s Choice of the Poor (v. 5).

While God in His grace has chosen some wealthy people to inherit the kingdom, throughout redemptive history, God has shown a special concern for calling the economically deprived and downtrodden to Himself. God gives the reason why He is pleased to do so in **1 Corinthians 1:26-29**. ***“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.”*** In showing partiality toward the rich, you have not only insulted the poor, you have insulted God and His wisdom.

B. The Rich and Powerful Consistently Abuse the Poor.

This is true whether it is done at the hands of a rich business corporation or a rich labor union. “The rich” refers to a class of society and does not mean that all rich people were this guilty. In chapter **5:4**, James gives an example of how the rich take advantage of the poor in the area of unfair labor practices. ***“Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears***

of the Lord of sabaoth.” He also reminds the believers that it is the rich who can use the judicial process to foreclose on mortgages on lands and of property of the poor.

C. The Rich are Hostile to the Cause of Christ.

This question reveals that the “rich” refers not to the rich visitor, or rich Christians, or all rich unbelievers, but to rich unbelievers who were abusing the Christian believers. In all probability, James had in mind the rich Sadducees who so fiercely opposed and slandered Jesus throughout His earthly ministry.

James is asking “Why would you want to show favoritism toward the rich and insult the poor, when God has chosen the vast majority of His people out of the poor? And since the rich as a class are always taking advantage of the poor, and they mock the name of Jesus Christ, why would you want to promote them?”

IV. THE SINFULNESS OF PARTIALITY - vs. 8-11

“If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.”

In this passage, James designated the command to love your neighbor as yourself as the “royal law.” He may have used the term royal, which pertains to that of a king, because Jesus, the true King, had given this law in **Matthew 22:39, “And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”** True love for one’s neighbor involves treating him with the same treatment as you would like him to treat you. Since most of James’ readers were poor themselves, they would have been insulted had they been shown the treatment they were showing toward the poor visitor who was asked to sit on the floor. James says partiality is not a minor act of being discourteous, but is a major act of sin!

He uses two words to describe immoral conduct in the eyes of God. One is “sin” in verse 9. It means to “miss the mark or target.” In being partial in their dealings with others, these believers were missing the mark as to what God had called them to become. The second word is “transgressors.” This word means “to go beyond.” It is a strong word which does not mean a mere unintentional slip or mistake, but a deliberate crossing of a clearly marked line of conduct in Scripture. In violating this law, these believers were without excuse. They were already convicted (convicted) by the law as being guilty of transgression.

Verses 10 and 11 show that the unity of the law lies in the person of God who gave it. In refusing to obey one of God’s laws, we are rejecting the authority of God which lies beneath the Law’s requirements. James is not teaching that all sins are equal. Stealing an apple is not the same as committing adultery. But every sin does bring guilt. If I console myself that as long as I don’t commit adultery, I can steal an apple and be free from sin, I deceive myself. The lesser sin still makes me a transgressor of God’s law and insults His character.

V. THE JUDGMENT ON PARTIALITY - vs. 12, 13

“So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath showed no mercy; and mercy rejoices against judgment.”

James concludes this segment of his letter by reminding his readers that a judgment day is coming for all men when they will be judged by Jesus Christ Himself. He reminds us that our judgment will cover three distinct areas of our lives:

- A. Our words - ***“so speak ye”***
- B. Our actions - ***“so do . . . the law of liberty”***
- C. Our attitudes - ***“judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy.”***
“Show mercy to others and you will triumph in the judgment”