

Practical Christianity

FAITH AT WORK AGAINST PARTIALITY

James 2:1-13

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PREAMBLE

James begins this section with these words: My brethren, hold not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons (*James 2:1*). The New American Standard Bible says, “My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism”. (Italics mine.)

The New King James Version has “with partiality”. The Amplified Bible has the following: “Show no prejudice, no partiality”.

The NLT renders it this way **“My brothers and sister how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?”** (*James 2:1*).

“Respect of persons,” “personal favoritism,” “partiality,” “prejudice,” “snobbery” {those who are incline to social exclusiveness and who rebuff the advances of people considered inferior} - such were common sins in James’ days and even in our current society.

But people thought little of these sins in James’ day - as they do in ours. So in the first thirteen verses of chapter 2, James lets his readers, including us know of the seriousness of these things.

The primary cause of these attitudes is Prejudice {prejudgment, bias, partiality}. How easy it is to have a wrong judgment toward others - as individuals or as a class of people.

Common giveaways of this kind of prejudice are the words “every” and “all”. Example; “All politicians are corrupted”; All Edos’ are trouble makers”; “Every Isoko person repeats his greetings”. We make such statements casually, not knowing how they hurt others. It is only when we become the target of such slander that it dawns on us the meanness such attitudes.

The result of these attitudes is favoritism, what the KJV calls showing “respect of persons.” One common expression of favoritism that plagues the church today is cliquishness **{tendency to associate with only a selected group}**.

It is wonderful to have close friends in the church, but when we consciously or unconsciously exclude others from our circle of friends, the results can be tragic. If you doubt that the

problem of cliquishness exists in every congregation, just talk to a few nonaggressive newcomers.

As we read **James 2:1-13** it is obvious that the sin of showing partiality was one of the socially acceptable sins of James' day - one of those sins overlooked because all were doing it. But James wanted them to know that the sin is serious. To stress this, he makes an appeal to four of the most basic and fundamental doctrines of the New Testament: (1) the deity of Jesus, (2) the sovereignty of God, (3) the authority of God's word, and (4) the certainty of judgment.

Four sub-topics will be derived here which are quite awesome and revealing.

James key drive force, was on the sin of showing favoritism. He says, "Don't be a respecter of persons. . ."

1. BECAUSE THIS IS CONTRARY TO THE FAITH WE HAVE IN JESUS (2:1-4)

"My brethren," says James, "hold not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons" (v. 1). "The faith of our Lord Jesus Christ" does not refer to the faith Jesus had, but the faith we have in Jesus. And what do we believe about Jesus? James says He is "Lord" - the Ruler of our lives, He is "Jesus" - our Savior, He is "Christ" - our anointed Prophet, Priest, and King, and He is "the Lord of glory." God's glory is embodied in Jesus (**John 1:14**).

James is testifying to Jesus' deity (cf. John 1:1) "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1 KJV). James says that Jesus is God!

James declared that if you really believe in Jesus as Lord, Christ, and God, it is inconsistent to show respect of persons.

Maybe we need to understand exactly what we mean by "respect of persons." The phrase does not mean that we can never respect anyone (as we normally use the word respect) or that we cannot show honor to the deserving (**Romans 13:7**).

The phrase "respect of persons" is translated from a compound Greek word: **the Greek word for face plus the Greek word for accept or receive. It literally means to accept someone on the basis of his face, that is, on the basis of superficial, outward appearance.** We use similar expressions today. We speak of taking something "at face value," {those in portfolio investment may understand this better} or we say that "on the face of it" such and such seems to be true.

The phrase refers to making a judgment concerning someone on a superficial basis and then acting toward that person as though that judgment was valid. We have already seen that in various translations, this is referred to as showing partiality, favoritism, and even snobbery, James says to all Christians or using the NIV phrase,

"As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism." In today's world nepotism, tribalism and the likes come in. To do so is like trying to combine oil and water.

This type of prejudice and partiality is contrary to everything Jesus was, everything Jesus taught, and everything Jesus stood for. First, it is contrary to everything Jesus was.

Jesus showed no respect of persons on the basis of occupation (**Matthew 4:18, 19; 9:9**).

He showed no respect of persons on the basis of social standing (**Matthew 9:10; Luke 7:36**).

He showed no respect of persons on the basis of race (cf. **John 4:9; Matthew 8:5, 10**).

It is also contrary to everything Jesus taught. For instance, at **John 7:24** He said, “Judge not according to the appearance,” It is also contrary to everything Jesus stood for. He loved all. He died for all.

Key lesson, James is saying to us that we need to look at people through the eyes of Jesus. If a person is a Christian, he is our brother and worthy of family consideration.

If a person is not a Christian, he is stricken with the cancer of sin and should receive our most heartfelt kindness and concern.

Returning to our discussion of the phrase “respect of persons,” James shows a practical approach instead of leaving the topic in the realm of the theoretical; James gives a concrete example of the type of thing he has in mind:

“For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? (**James 2:2-4 NKJV**)

Here, James paints a vivid word picture demonstrating our discriminatory attitude towards the rich and the poor in our assembly. James closes this section by saying, “You are become judges with evil thoughts.” “With evil thoughts” is a descriptive phrase. A good translation would be, “**You have become evil-thinking judges.**”

To make superficial judgments concerning others, colored by our prejudices, is evil.

Not just in our assemblies but also in our secular world! It is evil because it destroys brotherhood and relationship. It is evil because it nullifies our Christian example. **It is evil because it hinders our evangelistic outreach.** It is evil because it is contrary to God’s will!

This brings us to James’ second line of thought as he says, “**Don’t be a respecter of persons.** . . .”

2. BECAUSE IT IS CONTRARY TO THE WILL OF GOD (2:5-7)

James begins: “Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? (**James 2:5-6 NKJV**) James says, Listen, KJV used “Hearken” He is pleading, “Listen to me, please.”

He calls his readers “beloved brethren.” He wants them to know that it is because he loves them that he contrasts their practice and God’s.

On the one hand God was “no respecter of persons” (**Acts 10:34, 35**). He “made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth” (**Acts 17:26**). National differences were no longer important to Him (**Acts 10:34**).

Social differences were not important to Him – The free or slave has one Master in Heaven. **(“And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him” Ephesians 6:9 NKJV)**. *“And you master’s show the same spirit to your slaves, and stop threatening them; for you know that your masters and theirs is in heaven, and that there is no respect of persons with him” (Ephesians 6:9 MNT)*. Regarding the needy, it was said of Him, *“For Jehovah heareth the needy, And despiseth not his prisoners” Psalms 69:33 ASV*. In fact, James says that God did “choose them that are poor as to the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom” (v. 5). **This does not mean that God went to the opposite extreme and gave preferential treatment to the poor over the rich. “Chosen” is used in the common New Testament sense of referring to those who had responded to God’s invitation. .**

The last of verse 5 says that God’s promises were “to them that love him”. But one cannot love God without obeying God (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3). God “chose” the poor because it was the poor who came to the Lord and did His will.

“For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong,” (1 Corinthians 1:26-27 RSV).

*It was said concerning Jesus, “..... **And the common people heard Him gladly.** (Mark 12:37 NKJV). I am not sure why the common people were more responsive to the gospel. One possible suggestion is that the poor start off feeling some need for help, even if it is physical. They do not feel self-sufficient. And this can carry over to the spiritual realm. But whatever the reason, the fact was that it was the poor who were most responsive to the gospel; even till this day.*

So it is said that God “chose” the poor. In contrast to this, that is, God choosing the poor; James says the believers act otherwise.. “But ye have dishonored the poor man” (v. 6). In context, they had despised or dishonored the poor man by making him stand while they gave the rich man the choice seat.

James says it is the poor, who had responded to God’s call, who were God’s special ones. They might be poor in material things in the world, but they were “rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom”. They were sons of God and heirs of all that their Father possessed!

James continues, by saying your preference of the rich over the poor makes no sense at all - for you are honoring the very ones who make your life the most miserable. The rich referred to here would most probably have been non-Christians.

The influential, powerful, and wealthy Jewish leaders were imposing their will on others in Jerusalem and in other places at the time of writing. Two specific types of oppression are mentioned by James in these verses. First, they used their influence in the corrupt courts of the day...v6.

Secondly, they blasphemed “the honorable name” by which they were called...v7. The rich nonbelievers blasphemed, made light of, and slandered the holy name of Christ. How foolish then, James is saying, to give preferential treatment to the rich over the poor. Calvin put it this way: “Why should a man honor his executioners and at the same time injure his friends?”

*A word of caution is required in application of the learnings in verses 5, 6 & 7. **We should not go to the opposite extreme and show preferential treatment to the poor over the rich.** Today some think that it is all right to “soak the rich” (they can afford it). This attitude is just as bad as it’s opposite and is condemned by this passage! We must have a Christian attitude toward the rich too.*

James now turns to his third line of thought as he says, “Do not be a respecter of persons. . .”

3. BECAUSE IT IS CONTRARY TO THE AUTHORITATIVE WORD (James 2:8-11)

*James points out that God not only practices nondiscrimination, He tells us to do the same: **If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (James 2:8-9 NKJV) Search the Bible through, and you will never find these exact words: “Do not discriminate against another because of his social standing, his background, or his color. “What you will find are principles that teach us we should not behave in such a manner.***

*You will find principles like Matthew 7:12, which says, **“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12 NKJV).”** One of the most important of these principles is found in the words, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”*

*This was first given in the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus, of course, echoed these basic truths and made them part of His covenant (**Matthew 22:36-40; Luke 10: 25-37**). In Luke 10, He also emphasized that one’s neighbor is determined by opportunity, not by geography {a Jewish man attacked by bandits, The Priest came along and passed by, A Temple Assistant (Levite) walked over and passed by, but **the despised Samaritan came along rendered help to the Jewish man**}.*

In this passage, loving one’s neighbor is called “the royal law.”

It may be called that because it has been given by our King; it may be called that because of its exalted position among the King’s laws; or it may be called that because it is to be followed by

those of us who are a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). Whatever the reason, James stresses its importance. Those who fulfill this law “do well.”

But on the other hand if you do not love all men but rather “have respect of persons, ye commit sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors” (v. 9). James has mentioned that respecter of persons {Partiality, favoritism, snobbery} is inconsistent, a mistake, even foolish. But now he tells them plainly that it is a sin, a transgression of God’s will.

To them, it may have been relatively unimportant, but James wants them to know that those who are guilty violate God’s word! James emphasized that when you treat the rich differently than you treat the poor, **you are not obeying the command to love your neighbor as yourself; you are, in fact, sinful individuals.**

James does not want this point to be missed. He hammers it home with these sobering words: “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.”

Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. **(James 2:10-11 NKJV)**

At first thought, what James says sounds very hard. “Stumble in one point” means to disobey one point of the Law. James says if you do that, you become “guilty of all.”

Perhaps we should quickly note that James is not saying that if you commit one sin, you might as well give up. Nor is he saying that if you commit one sin, you might as well go ahead and commit them all. **What he is saying is that we cannot pick and choose our sins, thinking of some as big, important sins and others as little, and unimportant sins. James wants us to know that sin is sin and the committing of any sin makes us a sinner, the breaking of any law makes us a lawbreaker.**

Sin is the result of a basic attitude of the heart. Any time an individual deliberately and flagrantly disobeys a command of God when he knows and understands what that command is, he shows that he has the basic disposition of heart to disobey all of God’s commands if it suits him. Thus, the deliberate breaker of one of God’s laws is in heart “guilty” of breaking “all.”

Here is the point James is making: The sin of showing partiality is A GREAT sin. One cannot say, “So what if my heart is filled with prejudice? I am not a murderer or an adulterer; therefore, I am really a fine person.” James says that when you show respect of persons, you have disobeyed God, you have become a lawbreaker, and you have become “guilty of all”.

But what if you do not remove it? James has one last point as he says, “Do not show respect of persons. . . .”

4. BECAUSE JUDGMENT IS SURE (2:12, 13)

This final point is tied closely with the previous point, but it is important enough to be mentioned separately. Judgment is sure, for “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this cometh judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). In light of this, James says, **“So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty”** (James 2:12 NKJV). This is good general advice; we need always to live in light of the coming judgment. But in this verse, the instructions are directly related to the sin of discrimination. First, “speaking” was part of their sin. They usher the rich man very comfortable seat while the poor can stand or sit under their footstool.

“Sit thou here in a good place”; they said to the poor man, “Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool.” The prejudices in our hearts are exposed most often from our words. Our words to and about others can show concern and compassion, or our words can be filled with criticism and bitterness.

Second, “doing” was part of their sin, since they ushered the rich and the poor to their respective seats. **Ultimately, our prejudices cause us to treat men differently.** If we love all, our lives will show it.

But why should we be concerned about our “speaking” and “doing”? We will all be “judged by a law of liberty.”

He uses the same term as he did in **James 1:25**; the “law of liberty” just refers to the New Testament of Jesus Christ. Jesus stressed that we will be judged by the words He spoke (**John 12:48**); and Paul noted that we will be judged by the gospel (**Romans 2:16**). In light of this judgment, we need to put forth every effort to remove prejudice from our hearts!

Listen to the first part of verse 13: “For judgment is without mercy to him that hath showed no mercy.” Judgment without mercy means certain condemnation! All of us are sinners (**Romans 3:23**); without mercy we are lost! But this is what one has to look forward to if he does not have mercy, love, and concern for all men.

Here is one of the Bible “bounce back”: **We receive what we give. Jesus gave the positive side of this principle in Matthew 5:7: “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.” James gives the negative. If we show no mercy, we will receive none.**

If we are not sensitive to the needs of others, God will not be sensitive to our needs. If we have no seat for the weary, we will have no place by the throne of God. If we have no compassion for the downhearted, we will receive no compassion in eternity!

James closes this section on this encouraging note: “. . . Mercy triumphs over judgment (**James 2:13 NKJV**) In other words, because of God’s mercy we need not fear the judgment.

The NLT renders it this way” There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when He judges you”. **God’s mercy makes up for what I lack, assuming that we are truly diligent (Hebrews 11:6) in doing His will.** In the context the emphasis is on a particular part of His will - showing no respect of persons, treating all with love.

“Jon Courson’s Application Commentary” commenting on James 2:12-13 present it thus; “Luke 6:38 is a verse often used in relation to the giving and offerings. But from the context, we know that when Jesus said, “Give, and it shall be given unto you: good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye measure it shall be measured to you again”. **He was speaking not of money but of mercy.**

In other words, if you are merciful to others, if you are forgiving toward others, if you are kind and compassionate with others, then when you need mercy and grace and kindness – and you will – it will be given to you. But if you have been harsh and judgmental, if you have been fault-finding and sin-sniffing, when you need mercy from others, there will be none for you”.

*Our beloved James is not saying here that showing mercy is all there is to doing the will of God. **No man can reason, “I condemn no man and, therefore, God will not condemn me.”** But James is saying that, all other things being equal, the man who shows mercy is the man who will receive mercy and thus can rejoice when he thinks about the coming judgment.*

CONCLUSION

*How are we speaking about others? How are we acting toward others? **How we speak and how we act will largely be determined by the attitudes within our hearts.** How do we really feel about other people? How do you relate with other tribes and races? How do we feel about other classes of people? Prejudice comes in many shapes and sizes.*

Can we say, we have never demonstrated favoritism in our actions and influence to achieve our goals? Is there prejudice in our hearts? James 2 verse 12 reminds us of the coming Day of Judgment. Let us look into the mirror of God’s word and brutally purged ourselves of this sin of Partiality.

*In light of this, James says, **“So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty”** (James 2:12 NKJV).*