



## THE SIN OF PARTIALITY JAMES 2:1-13

**Open to James 2.** We'll do a walkthrough and end with three implications.

**2 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.**

Now this word partiality—some translations say favoritism—doesn't mean that you can't like some people more than others. This isn't a prohibition on having friends or preferences. This Greek word here (προσωποληψία, Strongs #4283) literally means "to receive someone according to their face" (Blomberg, 106). To treat people in certain ways on the basis of what they look like. If my actions or reactions to you are based on your external appearances, James says that this is a no-go for anyone who has faith in Christ. Then he gives an example.

**For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in,** He says let's say your church is gathered and someone walks in and they look polished and shiny. Your translations says he's wearing a gold ring. Literally means "gold fingers"—someone who's clearly wealthy. So someone walks in with Rolex, and a Versace suit, and then another man—a poor man—comes in wearing shabby clothing—a dingy undershirt and worn out jeans, hair unkempt, hasn't showered, might even be pushing a shopping cart. I dunno—but do you get the picture here? One rich one poor—and James's is asking the question, "knowing nothing about them other than what appears to be their socioeconomic status, will you treat them differently?" And James warns us...

**3 and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?** So, James says if you look at Mr. Bling and ask him out to lunch, but look at the poor person and ask "Umm...can I help you?" we've become evil judges. If you see the rich guy and go up to him an effort to welcome him to our church, and you see the poor guy and do a U-Turn to go to the bathroom or make sure you're texting when you walk by—we've become evil judges.

This illustration reveals our tendency to gravitate toward people who come with maximum benefit and minimal cost. High reward low demand people are our favorite. Business school networking—connect yourself with people who will help you along. Our fellowship can easily become a sort of business networking where we make selective advantageous connections and avoid anyone that might cost us. And James says "No"—for bearing one another's burdens! It's a time to invest in people and run to, not from, brokenness—be it socioeconomic, emotional or spiritual. And if we demonstrate any sort of prejudice against people bc their immediate return on investment isn't obvious, we are on very dangerous ground. How dangerous? Well we may find ourselves opposing the very people God has chosen to be spiritually wealthy...

**5 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the**

ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? 8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. So, James gives three reasons why showing partiality is wrong: God honors them, the rich people have opposed you and your God, and it’s not loving your neighbor as yourself. Let me make a few brief comments about each one of these.

**(PACE) God honors them**—Verse 5 says that God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of his kingdom. If you’re not careful you can make the mistake some have and conclude that God has chosen all poor people for salvation. Some would even cite Lk. 6:20 “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” and use these as support for the poverty Gospel (and not paying their pastors!). Two problems with that, it goes against the NT’s consistent teaching of salvation by grace through faith, not poverty. And second of all it ignores the last phrase in verse 5; that is, the kingdom is only promised, “to those who love him.” So, there is no salvation through poverty.

Having said that, it’s right to recognize that God’s often designs and uses trying circumstances to create rich faith and surely poverty is one of those circumstances that God uses to produce a kind of trust and reliance on him that’s not produced by wealth. One commentator, “It is true that in the spiritual longrun, poverty can have a distinct advantage despite the present misery it may inflict.” (Paraphrase, Blomberg, 113). So, we should honor poor believers not only because God has redeemed them but bc their poverty has often produced a more intense faith—a greater dependence on God than the rich around them. Then he offers a practical reason:

**The rich have opposed you and your God:** Apparently, James is aware of instances wealthy people in power who have taken advantage of poor Christians in court and trash talked their faith and their God. And James says why would you pander to them? They haven’t done anything but makes things worse for you. Here’s a guy who has rich faith and you’re rolling out the red carpet for someone who’s trashing God’s name? Makes no sense.

**Showing partiality is a failure to love your neighbor as yourself:** Which he calls the Royal Law in Vs. 8 This isn’t modern psychology—“you need to love yourself”, “look in the mirror till you love what you see.” It’s a reference to the kind of concern and attention we give to ourselves even when we don’t like what we see—a commitment that extends beyond appearances. And if we grant that to ourselves but, deny it to someone because we don’t like how they look, we’ve shown partiality and we’re guilty—we’re transgressors of the law.

10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 11 For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. We talk a lot about the fact that we’re not saved by our obedience and this is why. Being saved by obedience would require keeping the whole law. For God there’s no scale of “good”. There’s two kinds of people: those who are perfect and those who are disqualified. He’s gives a hypothetical—that if someone kept the whole law but failed just one time, that person would be in need of redemption just as much as the person who broke every command. Whether it’s murder adultery, pride, taking a bite of a fruit, violating God’s holiness is a one strike and you’re out kind of thing and places us all in the same category—transgressors of the law.

Now let me be clear about what James *isn’t* saying. He’s not saying we’re all equally sinful. Simply because no one is perfect doesn’t mean that everyone is the same. People sin in greater measure than others.

Some people have also used this verse to argue that all sins are equal. Is that true? It depends what you mean. T-shirt illustration. James is teaching here that all sin—from the greatest to the least—leads to condemnation before God and a need to be redeemed. So you could say all and any sin disqualify you from heaven. But in a more intuitive sense of the word equal, all sins are not equal. They are not equal in their consequences in your life (i.e. can divorce over infidelity, for example), their effects on others, parable of the wise manager shows they are not equal in the punishments they receive, and in Mt. 23:23 Jesus tells the Pharisees that they should have given their tithes without ignoring the weightier issues of the law—justice, mercy, faithfulness. And so all sins aren't the same, but all sin qualifies us for judgment...

12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. Here, James says in plain language that those who do not show mercy, will not receive any. This isn't saying that our salvation is based on our mercy ministries but that's God's mercy—that triumphs over judgment—will invariably produce mercy in us. Those who have received mercy, extend it. More on that in a moment.

### Three Implications

#### **We will be tempted to value the wrong kind of wealth.**

James describes the rich man and the poor man—but he says the poor has a kind of wealth. He's rich in faith. Both men are rich. And James is pointing our tendency to more attracted to worldly wealth than spiritual wealth. A rich wallet is often more beautiful to us than a rich faith. But faith is the currency that counts in God's economy. No one's financial portfolio gives them VIP status with God and so there's no VIP status in the church. No upper-class spirituality. The ground is level at the foot of the cross where we all come to God as beggars with empty hands and if at any point we exalt or dismiss someone on the basis of their appearance, we disgrace the God we claim to honor.

Ambrose and Theodosius: "You do not reflect, it seems, O Emperor, on the guilt you have incurred by that great massacre; but now that your fury is appeased, do you not perceive the enormity of your crime? You must not be dazzled by the splendor of the purple you wear, and be led to forget the weakness of the body which it clothes...How could you lift up in prayer hands steeped in the blood of so unjust a massacre? Depart then, and do not by a second crime add to the guilt of the first...The Emperor, who was full of faith, now took courage to enter holy church where he prayed neither in a standing, nor in a kneeling posture, but throwing himself upon the ground. He tore his hair, struck his forehead, and shed torrents of tears, as he implored forgiveness of God. Ambrose restored him to favor, but forbade him to come inside the altar rail, ordering his deacon to say "The priests alone, O Emperor, are permitted to enter within the barriers by the altar...remain with the rest of the laity. A purple robe makes Emperors, but not priests."<sup>1</sup> Why? Because God shows no partiality—whether emperor or peasant rich or poor—far be it from us that we would act any differently.

#### **Those who do not show mercy demonstrate that they have not received it from God.**

This phrase translated, "show no partiality" that word "partiality" or "favoritism" is plural. Show no "partialities" or show no "acts of favoritism." So James gives a socioeconomic illustration but the application is much more broad and includes any number of prejudices we may have—whether it's socioeconomic status, or someone's past, someone's association with a group of people, and certainly

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<sup>1</sup> William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: Rome and the West, 298-300.

germane to our current situation someone's race. And failure in any one of these areas is a failure to show mercy. We tend to think of mercy as forgiving someone or giving someone something they don't deserve, but in the Bible mercy—which is often paired with justice—has a much broader connotation and refers to righteous words and actions geared toward those who are vulnerable—this is an inescapable part of pure religion James says. Advocating for and not waving away folks who the world sees as disposable.

And this is why racism is so serious. Unlike the world, Christians don't think about racism in sociological terms, but theological terms. Racism isn't wrong because it violates the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment. Racism is wrong because the Bible says all people are created in the image of God. Fashioned uniquely by God for God—thus having intrinsic worth. And to demote an image bearer because of the skin color their Creator gave them is slander against the Master Artist. Do you see how serious this is? It's so serious that James says if you're someone who doesn't show mercy—if you would devalue a minority on face value—you demonstrate that you haven't even received mercy yourself. You're not saved. Judgment is without mercy to you because you've shown no mercy. You've become an evil judge. That's why advocating for and not oppressing the vulnerable is a non-negotiable for believers. Racism is simply not an area where we can agree to disagree.

That being said, it's hard to overstate how serious the charge someone with racism is. And yet one scroll through FB and you notice that words like racist and white supremacist have been cheapened and watered down. People throw these labels around to add some punch to their argument—if you support their poise you're racist. If you aren't paying reparations, you're a white supremacist. Like it's just a cultural or political insult. Calling someone a racist isn't a cultural or political insult it's a theological indictment. It's a statement that someone may very well be under God's judgment as one who hasn't shown mercy.

So, you better be really really careful if you call someone a racist. You better think long and hard before you label someone a white supremacist. Don't you dare say someone is a racist because they didn't agree with your article or your post or your political position. Don't you dare call someone a White Supremacist because they're the people they look up to are mostly white or because they don't have a ton of black friends. There is a place for conversation, and critique, and even debate but there is no room to throw around words like racist and White Supremacist to add a little rhetorical sting to the point you're trying to make. When you accuse someone of being an individual who doesn't show mercy—being a racist—you are calling into question their salvation. Why? Showing mercy—not favoritism—is a necessary expression of saving faith. And loving minorities, the disenfranchised, and the least of these is an inescapable part of what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. Those who do not show mercy demonstrate that they have not received it from God.

### **The works of every believer will be judged by God.**

**12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.** God has placed James in the Bible to be a mirror into own souls and how much we need to grow and we can't blunt the force of statements like this. And at face value it appears as if we will be judged according to our works. I thought I was going to be judged on the basis of Christ's work, not mine. Now we know Romans 3:21 that no one is justified by the works of the law. Eph 2:8-9 that we're saved not by works so that no one may boast. We're so clear about that around here. But if we're not careful there's a tendency to downplay the importance of works. So what do we do with these. If our works aren't what save us, what are their significance?

Well first, as we've mentioned, our works will serve as the evidence that our faith was real. A good tree bears good fruit, Jn 15:5-6 **“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever**

abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” God is going to inspect our faith for fruit. 1 Jn 2:4, “Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him...” So our mercy, our care for orphans and widows our love joy peace kindness all of these things will be the evidence that when we said I love Jesus it wasn’t all fake.

But there’s a second sense in which we’ll be judged according to our works and that the judgment of reward. The Bible talks about a day when God will judge all people. But unless you’re alive when Jesus returns, that can’t be the judgment of salvation. Think about it... So what judgment is left—judgment of reward. (Lk. 14:13-14) “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind—this is mercy—and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” 1 Cor. 3:12-15 “<sup>12</sup> Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— <sup>13</sup> each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. <sup>14</sup> If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” Notice not only do our rewards correspond with our works, but not everyone will get the same rewards because not everyone was equally as faithful. And this is right in line about what James’s big brother Jesus teaches in the parable of the minas (Lk 19)—where the manager gives 3 men the same amount of money and when he returns he rewards them all in direct proportion to how faithful they were to steward what he gave them. Judgment according to works. You will be saved based on Christ’s faithfulness but rewarded based on yours. Thief on the cross won’t have as much as Apostle John.

It doesn’t mean that anyone will have a sense of lack, but perhaps that some will have greater capacity to enjoy God’s glory than others (Illustration: different sized buckets). This is a huge motivator to obeying in general and showing mercy in particular. So we pursue good works because they will be examined and judged and rewarded accordingly. Our obedience and faithfulness in the 8 years we have here will effect your experience of eternity 500,000,000,000 years from now.

Let me close with this—seen a lot of Amos 5:24 “let justice roll down.” But a lot of people saying this are the same people that don’t believe in a God of wrath who judges. But a God like that isn’t just and doesn’t administer justice. What is God’s justice but his judgment upon and judicial hatred of sin? God giving people exactly what they deserve for their sin. And so if you’re listening and you’ve called for God’s justice to roll down, you can believe that it will because he judges sin—but in doing so He shows no partiality. Which means that God’s justice and judgment won’t merely roll down for some police officer’s sin or the sin of some group or institution. Friends God’s justice will roll down on your sin.

How will you take shelter from judicial justice God is committed to exercising upon your sin?