

Impartial Disciples

Devotional Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

Background Scripture: James 2.

Scripture Lesson Text: James 2:1-13

James 2:1-13 *My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

⁵ Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.”^[c] If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

TODAY'S AIM

- **Facts:** to examine James 2:1-13, a passage that teaches us to be impartial disciples.
- **Principle:** to teach that people are worthy of the same respect regardless of wealth or social status.
- **Application:** Suggest one specific way to implement the royal law more fully in his or her life or church.

INTRODUCTION

When Jesus was born, He was welcomed by humble shepherds as well as by wealthy Magi. He gave no special recognition to the religious elite at Jerusalem. In fact, they opposed Him for spending time with social outcasts. Although the wealthy Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea ministered to Him at His death, it was Galilean fishermen who carried His message of life abroad.

The apostles also taught that God does not respect persons. They led a spiritual body in which social, national, racial, and gender differences were unimportant.

To our shame, we often succumb to worldly pressure to value people for wealth and rank. Churches sometimes forsake poor neighborhoods, shun persons from unsavory backgrounds, and refuse to condemn sins of greed and injustice. This is why James had to give the instruction found in this week's text.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Today's text expands on James 1:17–27 (last week) to show how vital it is for Christians to give words and feet to the gospel that is planted in their lives. An embarrassing feature of early Christian gatherings was that the wealthy were given preferential treatment. It is surprising that Christianity attracted any interest at all from the socially advantaged, since first-century Christianity was not a dominant world religion as it is today. By all historical accounts, Christianity was viewed as an obscure sect that attracted an odd assortment of Jews, Gentiles, women, slaves, etc. Christianity did not emerge out of the shadow of Judaism until almost the second century AD.

Though a few people of advantage did attach themselves to Christianity, early Christianity was primarily a religion of people outside of power. "The crowd," the nameless in Jewish society, were the ones who followed Jesus from place to place. He openly and compassionately associated with those "at the bottom": tax collectors, widows, children, lepers, the demon-possessed, Samaritans, Gentiles.

Mary's song at Jesus' birth prophesied the reversal of social positions that He would bring (Luke 1:52, 53). The reversal of position in Jesus' kingdom is addressed in James 1:9–11 and is assumed to be the backdrop to 2:1–13. Here, language similar to Jesus' teaching as found in the Gospels is evident.

Unholy Discrimination (James 2:1–7)

James began his instruction with a negative command. In the Greek text it reads, *"My brethren, do not with respect of persons have the faith."* The emphasis falls on the sin he is about to condemn. "Respect of persons" is, literally, "receiving of faces." It means giving more respect to one person than another because of outward appearance alone. James's appeal is that we not allow our faith in Christ to be contaminated by manifestations of favoritism.

Such acts are inconsistent with a faith that centers on our Lord Jesus Christ, for He never showed partiality. If Christ is our Lord of glory, why do we glory in others? By showing favoritism, we exalt men and detract from Him.

1. Why is respect of persons (favoritism) incompatible with a faith that focuses on Jesus Christ (James 2:1)?

James depicted how partiality can occur among believers. Though it is hypothetical, it is close enough to reality to prick the consciences of his readers. He pictured two men who come into the

synagogue. The term used for assembly is actually the word synagogue in Greek, normally expressing the regular gathering of Jews primarily for teaching and prayer.

The two men who enter are no doubt strangers; the worshipers have no knowledge of them except what they see at that moment.

One is a man of immense influence—perhaps a landowner, nobleman, or politician; the other is someone everyone wants to avoid. One wears a gold ring, symbolizing power. He also has an impressive outer cloak perhaps, his best of many selections. The other has none of this. He simply comes in “off the street,” smelly, unwashed, unkempt.

Almost everyone, then and now, would do the same thing James describes with this situation: pander to the rich guy and ignore or insult the smelly guy. The poor man is sent to sit on the floor. The rich man receives a seat of honor. Yet these seating arrangements have nothing to do with character or faith conviction. The host has only looked at the men superficially.

Only a person of extraordinary conviction could possibly treat them the same or even reverse their positions. Yet to do so would model the central tenets of Christianity. In God’s kingdom the position of the rich and poor will be reversed. Why not begin having “no respect of persons” in the church now?

2. In James's illustration, how is the rich man received (vs. 2,3)?

Some who teach, lead music, or pray from the platform at church dress casually in order to make visitors wearing various clothing styles feel welcome. Some folks always “dress up” for church services because they believe that that is a sign of respect (as in “giving your best to the Master”). The risk is that those who can’t dress as well because of limited resources may feel unaccepted.

Whatever level of casualness in our dress, modesty is always a legitimate concern. An important motivation in selecting style of dress is that we not draw attention to ourselves and away from Christ. Discuss motives of economic consideration in addition to motives of “being genuine.”

3. What kind of clothing do you choose to wear to church? What motivates your choices? What should motivate your choices?

James now drives the lesson home. He asks a question that expects a positive answer—an answer that condemns the readers' actions. “*Have you not discriminated among yourselves*” should be taken as “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves?” They have made distinctions between rich and poor in their midst. In so doing they have “*become judges with evil thoughts*” They have set themselves up as critics who pass judgment on the basis of unjust reasoning.

This is unjust. Christ receives all people equally, but the ones James addressed are unwilling to do so. It is easy for us to see the injustice of what James's readers did. But we are prone to the same sin. Wealth is not the only criterion by which modern churches make unjust distinctions. Discrimination is just as often on the basis of education, age, race, nationality, gender, or marital status. God makes spiritual distinctions, and by these we must be bound. But all others have no place in the church.

4. In what sense are partisan Believers judges with evil thoughts (v. 4)?

Verses 5–7 James asks four rhetorical questions that assume a yes response. They are intended to draw attention to matters that the church already knows but has not applied to the issue of discrimination among themselves.

The first question reminds the church that God remains the champion of the poor. Had God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith? There is some mystery surrounding God's choice of the poor, for Scripture does not teach that He chooses people on the basis of social class. But it is true that a higher proportion of poor than of rich are believers (cf. Matt. 19:23-24; 1 Cor. 1:26-29).

Ironically, the "*poor in the eyes of the world*" (James 2:5)—that is, poor by this world's economic standards—are "rich in faith." God has a special love for the humble and the poor. They were most often the ones who accepted His Son on earth, and they are usually the ones who quickly acknowledge their need for Him.

These are the ones who have will "*inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him*" (Jas. 2:5). Their rich faith is accompanied by pure love for their Redeemer, and He honors them with an eternal inheritance (Jas. 1:12; cf. Luke 6:20-23). Not all poor gain this inheritance, and not all rich miss it. But the poor are more likely to have the faith and love to enter God's kingdom.

5. What is God's attitude toward the believing poor (v. 5)?

Just before asking a second and third rhetorical question, James accuses the church of mistreating the poor. If they are treating the poor in any way like the picture in verses 3, 4, then they certainly have despised them.

Using questions, James goes on to remind the church of the social and economic realities of the time. Many of the believers are poor themselves in the eyes of the rich; as such, they surely have experienced the strong arm of exploitation wielded by the rich and powerful. Then as now the wealthy have the advantage in court; they know the law, the judges, and the politicians. They own land, and their interests often affect the jobs and development of communities. Thus, they are pictured colorfully as being able to draw or drag the poor into court against their will.

What is imagined here is not criminal court, but civil court. There the rich seek debt repayment or seek to extend property rights. The fourth question about the rich was this: "*Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?*" (v. 7). This establishes that these rich men were unbelievers. Not only do they despise the poor and oppress Christians, but the rich direct their assaults against the Lord Himself. They blaspheme (Gr blasphemeo) or "speak evil against" that worthy name by the which ye are called, i.e., Christians (Acts 11:26).

Anyone studying these verses must not only consider how he or she is treated by the rich but should also consider that they may well be among those who are exploiting the poor in their culture, whether in business or personally.

6. What does James criticize about the unbelieving rich (vs. 6,7)?

Royal Law (James 2:8–13)

Our next section shows that discrimination against another person is a violation of the love-for-neighbor as thyself principle. Those who violate this principle put themselves at a major disadvantage at judgment, since this is the measure that will be applied.

The law of loving one's neighbor is found in Leviticus 19:18. Jesus elevated this law to a position above all other laws, except the command to love God (Matthew 22:36–40; Mark 12:28–31). The impact of this teaching on the early church can be observed in the teaching of Paul (Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14) and in the verses before us, which seek to evaluate behavior based on this principle.

James specifically connects this principle of neighbor love to Jesus' teaching about His kingdom by describing it as royal. James now takes the microscope of the love-for-neighbor principle and uses it to look at the issue of discriminating against others. Treating others positively or negatively based on superficial cues demonstrates a failure to love them as our neighbors. Within the ethical principles established by Jesus for those in His kingdom, this is blatant sin. To discriminate is to break the law of Jesus.

7. What law do we transgress when we show partiality (vs. 8,9)?

There are many possibilities. Perhaps we can begin with this question: What ministries could our church family initiate that would express love to the needy in our community—those who don't know Jesus, the shut-ins, latchkey children, etc.? Congregations may choose to organize food pantries, ministries to shut-ins, after-school activities for latchkey children, or outreach that helps children with their schoolwork.

These may be new ministries or enhancements to already established community programs. Most larger municipalities have services such as Meals on Wheels, Big Brother/Big Sister programs, etc. A vital consideration is to make sure that all involved know that you are ministering in the name of Christ.

An organized program is not essential for showing God's love. Individuals who pray for opportunities to show kindness to others surely will be blessed with such. How important is this? According to Matthew 25:31–46, it is the way we show our love to Jesus himself!

8. What are some ways we can follow the "royal law" of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves?

Someone might object that showing partiality is, after all, only a minor breach of the law. But James answered that a person cannot divide the law into fragments and decide which pieces he will observe. Obedience to the many cannot atone for transgression of the one.

The reason for this guilt lies in the unity of the law. All of it comes from one Lawgiver; to disobey any part of it is to violate His will and reject His lordship. The One who forbade adultery is the same One who forbade murder. So whoever commits one sin but not the other is still guilty, for he is transgressing the boundary set by the very character of God.

9. Why does one sin amount to violating the whole law (vs. 10,11)?

The law of liberty is the standard by which our lives will be measured. It is a guideline in all things. Although we may tend to think of our lives primarily as a sequence of right or wrong actions, this verse brings the way we talk into the equation.

This is important because people probably have more opportunity to do more harm or good by what they say than by what they do. This verse picks up on an issue that becomes a full-blown concern in James 3. Jesus says in Matthew 15:11 that it is what comes “out of the mouth” that contaminates people.

Both words and behavior will be judged, then. But judged for what purpose? Aren’t Christians already saved from judgment for their sins by the cross and the grace of God? The New Testament is very clear that although believers escape condemnation through the blood of Christ, they do not escape unevaluated. Second Corinthians 5:10 tells us that this evaluation is to be done by Christ and that everything we have done—our entire lives—will be surveyed. What verse 12 clarifies is that this judgment will include what we say and that it will be based upon Christ’s law of liberty, or loving our neighbor.

In verse 13 James picks up the teaching of Jesus found in Matthew 5:7: “*Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.*” Within this beatitude is the kernel of Christ’s law of neighbor love, but also the threat of judgment. Everyone wants to be given the benefit of the doubt by their coworkers, family, and friends. We need the forgiveness and forbearance of others when we mess up. This need should be the spark that makes us want to do the same for others.

To add to our motivation, this verse develops the beatitude to promise judgment on those who fail to show mercy, on those who do not live their lives on the basis of Christ’s law of love. In His Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus likewise depicted severe punishment for the man who was forgiven a large debt he owed but would not forgive a smaller one owed to him (Matthew 18:21–35).

Verse 13 ends with a proverbial saying that promises safe passage through Christ’s seat of judgment for those who live their lives in ways that consciously implement Christ’s law of love. They do this by exercising mercy to others. The word *triumph* depicts more than just “getting through.” It pictures celebration in the face of anticipated victory, dancing with joy into our eternal reward.

If we live our lives under the rule of love, we can enter judgment with supreme confidence that we have pleased Christ and that He will say, “*Well done, you good and faithful servant*” (Matthew 25:21). If we live this way, it also is good news for the people around us. Among other things we won’t be showing contempt for those “below” us in the social and economic orders of our culture. Nor will we give undue deference to those “above” us. We will not discriminate on such superficial things, just as God does not. We will be the impartial disciples whom Christ desires.

10. By what law will we be judged in the future judgment (vs. 12,13)?

CONCLUSION

The last two verses sound a warning. Whereas Israel was judged on the degree to which they observed the law God gave them through Moses, those who form the church will be evaluated on their implementation of Christ's law for His kingdom. Israel was sent into exile for breaking their covenant with God. What will happen to those in the church? We must look closely at our lives and be fully aware of how well we are loving our neighbor. As Christians, not to live with this principle at the forefront of all our behavioral decisions is to invite God's condemnation.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Uphold the dignity of every person, both inside and outside the church.

PRACTICAL POINTS:

1. Favoritism is inconsistent with faith in Christ (James 2:1).
2. The way we treat people must never be motivated by what those people can or cannot do for us (vs. 2-4).
3. We dishonor Christ if we judge people by worldly standards of success (vs. 5- 7).
4. We are called to love others, not to determine whether they deserve to be loved (vs. 8,9).
5. We cannot excuse "minor" sins, for all sins are offensive to God (vs. 10,11).
6. Our words and actions must al-ways be considered in light of God's standard (vs. 12,13).

PRAYER

Father of us all, who created us to flourish in the world You made, give us the courage to live out our lives with the unrestricted love You have shown us in Jesus Christ. Enable us to display to the world a community of faith that dignifies all people, even as Christ did. In His name, amen.