

Faith, Love, Wealth – and Discrimination? James 2:1-13

James 1:1-13 Introduction

- Some passages are harder than others for a church to hear and take to heart.
- This one seems relatively easy at first glance.
- James tells us that we should treat the poor kindly and fairly.
- Some of us may feel we are poor.
- As a church, we try to care for the needy among us and around us, regularly giving out food and clothing.

- We might hastily conclude that we have little to learn from this passage.
- A closer look, however, reveals that what James really opposes is any judgment based on mere appearances – and anyone can be guilty of that.
- He ties all of this to what he calls “the royal law,” the law of loving our neighbor.
- In this area we all have something to learn.

God loves people regardless of outward appearance; we ought to go and do likewise.

James 1:1-13 Outline

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- Let’s read the whole passage through.

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The Main Issue 2:1

- First, a doctrinal point:
- *the Lord of Glory* This is not an exact translation, but it gets the meaning across quite well.
- The original says, “our Lord Jesus Christ of glory.”
- It could also be translated “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.”
- However we translate it, this is a strong statement of Christ’s deity.
- A devout, monotheistic Jew such as James would not be careless about putting the words “Lord” and “glory” together, unless he meant to give reference to God. See Isaiah 48:11.

- *Now, on to James’s main point.*

- Discrimination, either for or against people, is inconsistent with faith in Christ.
- Partiality is from a word that means to accept or judge “according to face.” It is making judgments about people based on their appearance.
- Partiality here is plural: “partialities,” meaning discrimination of any kind is in view.
- James will focus on wealth and poverty.

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One Clear Example 2:2-4

- 2:2-4 The situation is hypothetical.
- “Let’s suppose this should happen.”
- Two men enter your assembly, literally, “synagogue” – the gathering of the church.
- One looks poor and the other looks well to do.
- So how will we treat the two of them?
- All other things being equal, we should treat them both the same.

- 2:2-4 James is not implying that no one should ever get special treatment. Here are some people God actually wants us to honor:
 - Our parents (Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16)
 - The elderly (Leviticus 19:32)
 - Those in public office (Romans 13:7, 1 Peter 2:17)
 - Widows (1 Timothy 5:3)
 - Elders or pastors (1 Timothy 5:17, Hebrews 13:17)
 - Our boss at work (1 Timothy 6:1)

- Based on these listed we might even think of a few more to emphasize:
 - An older person at work, maybe not our boss
 - A public official we happen to disagree with
 - Our teachers or college professors
- In other words, some forms of special treatment show that we respect the position.
- There is no hypocrisy in showing such respect; it is actually a very classy thing to do.

- Back to James’s example:
 - The honor given the man with the gold rings is not based on any biblical reason.
 - This is simple discrimination. It is bigotry against the poor – and favoring the rich.
 - This dishonors the poor man who is equally made in God’s image and equally in need of God’s grace.
 - See Proverbs 22:2.

- Treating people this way, James says, indicates that we have become “judges with evil thoughts.”
- Why might we make judgments based on appearances?
 - We want friends that make us look good.
 - We want the people we idolize to think well of us.
 - We dislike some people who are either unlike ourselves or unlike those we idolize.

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God’s Perspective 2:5-7

- Let’s consider what James says:
- He is clearly expressing a *general truth*, not an *absolute truth*.
 - James mentions Abraham later in this chapter.
 - He mentions Job in Chapter 5.
 - Both of these men were examples of godliness and both were very rich.

- The Lord does not always choose the poor and only choose the poor.
- Similarly, rich and poor alike may persecute believers and blaspheme the name of Jesus.
- Yet, in general, James’s example is not only true – but overpoweringly true.

- Most of us Christians are nobody special.
- See what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.
- Consider also the example of Israel as a distinct nation.
- Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all wealthy.
- But in God's plan, their descendants became slaves in Egypt for several generations.
- Then God liberated them, choosing a nation of freed slaves over Pharaoh, his wealth and his army, and the world's superpower of that day.
- God has a knack for choosing the needy, the underprivileged, the disregarded, the unhip – the people the world would never admire.
- So when we intentionally befriend them, show them respect or kindness, or care for them in their time of need, we are being a lot like God.
- We are behaving a lot like Jesus who paid attention to needy people.

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Learning to Apply the Law 2:8-13

- 2:8 Here is the royal law, the law of the King.
- James is quoting Leviticus 19:18.
 - Jesus quotes it in Matthew 22:39.
 - Paul quotes it in Romans 13:9.
- The Bible puts loving others – indiscriminately, we may add – right up there with loving God.
- 2:9 Showing partiality, or judging by appearances, is not acting on the basis of love.
- Love does not ask us to like the way people look – or dress, or smell, for that matter.
- Love does not ask us to agree with people or approve of all they do.
- Love mainly asks us to care.

“Everything conspires today to define ‘love’ primarily in emotional terms. Scripturally, love is to be defined in caring terms, for the love that is owed to our neighbour is the love we expend on ourselves.”

– J. Alec Motyer, in *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith.*

- 2:10-11 Any violation of the law of God makes us lawbreaker.
- And if I'm a lawbreaker, then I stand guilty before God and need His forgiveness.
- Total obedience requires me to unfailingly love my neighbor.
- Since I have not done so, the law convicts me as a transgressor (v.9).
- I stand in need of God's grace.
- 2:10-11 James may have chosen murder and adultery as examples based on Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.
- In that context, Jesus teaches that these sins, committed even in the heart, still constitute sin and render us guilty before God.
- Christ's point, and the point of James, is that no one can stand before God entirely guiltless.
- We have no room for self-righteousness.

- 2:10-11 It would be wrong, however, to imagine that there is no such thing as a greater or lesser sin.
 - Jesus speaks of a “greater sin” in John 19:11.
 - He speaks of two servants who had varying degrees of debt. (Luke 7:41-47)
 - He also tells several parables speaking of greater rewards and punishments. (e.g., Luke 12:42-48)
 - Even here on earth, some sins obviously have greater consequences.

- 2:10-11 One sin is enough to make us guilty, but that gives us no freedom to sin, as in, “Hey, I’m guilty anyway, so who cares?”
 - Our goal as believers must be to minimize sin and maximize obedience.
 - A loving response to God is precisely a response of loving obedience.
 - And, let’s not forget, we will face a final judgment, whether for rewards or punishment.

- 2:12 We may think law and liberty are opposites, but we would be mistaken.
 - James is right (See also 1:25).
 - The law is liberating because it helps us to know God’s will, keeping us free from the bondage of sin.
 - Think of David and how he could sing in praise of God’s perfect law.
 - See Psalm 19

- 2:13 Without mercy is not quite the same thing as “merciless,” but it is serious business.
 - If we fail to take shelter under divine mercy, then the law takes its completely just course.
 - We get what we deserve, but is that what we truly need?
 - The presence of a merciful spirit within us assures us that we understand the mercy of God toward us.

“This is our position before God. Judgment looks at our deserts; mercy at our needs. And God himself looks at the cross of his Son.”

– J. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith.*

- And if God’s mercy triumphs over judgment toward us, it is only right that we become the instruments of His mercy toward others.

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James 1:1-13 Conclusions

God's Love for the Poor:

- If we claim to follow Jesus, then we will be persistently on the side of the poor, the disadvantaged and the needy.
- When we do this, we identify ourselves with the very heart of God and adhere obediently to the main tendency of his revealed will.
- God's nature leads him to identify with the needy and helpless. What he has done for us (as needy and helpless), is a model for us to follow.

Non-Discrimination:

- Partiality – favoritism based on appearances – is wrong no matter how it is practiced.
- God loves people across the board.
- We will benefit from examining our hearts to see if we harbor any bias within us – for or against anyone – based on outward characteristics.
- In this church, let's also be careful of believing that we are somehow more deserving of God's grace than Christians in wealthier churches.

Learning to Love the Law:

- James refers to the Law as "the law of liberty," and clearly holds the law in high esteem.
- Paul was able to say this: "*I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.*" (Romans 7:22)
- Can that also happen within us?
- Can we cultivate a heart for God's law?

- Yes! One way to look at it is like this:
 - We are new creatures in Christ.
 - Therefore, Christ dwells within us.
 - The reality of our new nature waits to be activated by the precepts of God's law.
 - We are called to obey His commands, and, because the law matches the wishes and abilities of the new heart, we find ourselves able to do so.

The Royal Law - Learning to Love Our Neighbor:

- As it happens, John Calvin nails this pretty solidly:
"[O]ur life shall best conform to God's will ... when it is in every respect most fruitful for our brethren ... [H]e lives the best and holiest life who lives and strives for himself as little as he can, and ... no one lives in a worse or more evil manner than he who lives ... for himself alone, and ... seeks only his own advantage."
- He continues:
*"[W]e ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, ...
"Therefore, if we rightly direct our love, we must first turn our eyes not to man, the sight of whom would more often engender hate than love, but to God, who bids us extend to all men the love we bear to him, that this may be an unchanging principle: Whatever the character of the man, we must yet love him because we love God."*

- But of course, the best teaching in the world on this topic comes straight from Jesus.
- Let's close by reading Luke 10:25-37.