

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 8 Do Not Be Partial James 2:1-13 Date: October 19, 2014

I. Is Your Bias Showing?

James 2:1-4

In a very practical way, James, in this section of the letter, captures what was surely a problem in the churches he was writing to, since he spends so much time discussing it. We must first of all recognise – if we are honest – that this problem is cross-cultural & cross-generational so it is in no way restricted to the first century. There is a tendency for this reaction to exist in modern churches as well. The 13 verses break down into 3 sections:

- Verses 1-4: an attitude of favoritism against the poor contradicts God's evaluation of the poor whom He honours.
- Verses 5-7: fawning over the rich and influential betrays a servile mentality, especially since the rich were the ones most often persecuting the Christian community.
- Verses 8-13: this sort of action violates God's demands that we love our neighbour as ourselves and thus also goes against Jesus' focus on that command as tantamount to showing love for God.ⁱ

The first aspect of this is explained in vv. 1-4, and is stated in first century terms. The gold ring to us is no big deal, since today, to us, it's a fairly common symbol of being married, but in the first century, only the rich wore such jewellery as a status symbol of their monetary success. The fine clothes backed that up and made it obvious to all that they were "a cut above" the average normal people who could never afford such finery, since all their money went to food and shelter, and sometimes did not even cover that.

On the other hand, the obviously poor also make themselves known by their appearance – shabby clothes are the main evidence James mentions. Now, today, shabby clothes are not always an indicator of one's social status, because they may be part of a current style trend (like jeans with holes in them on purpose – although even this is far different from grungy, dirty clothes worn day after day by one who has no change of clothes), but it was obvious to this church, and some commentators believe that James is dealing with an actual incident that had occurred.

We like to think that we, being more enlightened by modern thought, would never react in such a way to such people who came to our church out of the blue, but if we are honest with ourselves, we do see it, perhaps more subtly than what James illustrates, but nevertheless it is our natural reaction to follow our bias when we encounter people who are "different" from us. Modern churches leaders and church-goers – on average - do tend to favour those whom they know to be wealthy and could therefore, if they are 'givers', help with the church budget, while generally poor people, or those without good looks, or with physical or mental handicaps are treated

with diffidence and thus (maybe even inadvertently) are ostracized from the cliques that inevitably form within any social group, including most churches. In some places, to the church's shame, race plays a role too.

Brian Vickers presents a good example;

"If, for instance, a famous pastor or speaker visited your church this week, you would be eager to speak to him, spend time with him and perhaps take him out to lunch after church – none of which is wrong in and of itself. It would be strange to say the least, for a guest speaker to arrive and have to get his own taxi from the airport, find a hotel room, make his way to the church, and be ignored during his visit. But what if, on the same day the famous pastor is in town, a family visits from off the street? Would they get the same reception? In most places they would probably not be asked to move to the back of the church, but would they be made to feel equally as welcome? I am sure that in many churches they would be, but ask it on a personal level – if your favorite preacher/theologian came to your church this weekend and a homeless family came in the door at the same moment, where would your attention go?"ⁱⁱ

Kent Hughes illustrates this issue as well;

"Christian bodies all tend to succeed, calcify and become elitist, as a woman who lived across the tracks and wanted to join a very fashionable church, found out. She talked to the pastor about it, and he suggested she go home and think about it carefully for one week. At the end of the week, she came back. He said, "Now, let's not be hasty. Go home and read your Bible for an hour a day every day this week. Then come back and tell me if you feel you should join." Although she wasn't happy about this, she agreed to do it. The next week she was back, assuring the pastor that she wanted to become a member of the church. In exasperation, he said, "I have one more suggestion. You pray every day this week and ask the Lord if He wants you to come into our fellowship." The pastor did not see the woman for six months. He met her on the street one day and asked her what she had decided. She said, "I did what you asked me to do. I went home and prayed. One day, while I was praying, the Lord said to me, "Don't worry about not getting into that church. I've been trying to get into it myself for the last twenty years!"ⁱⁱⁱ

An issue that James would never have considered is a phenomenon prevalent in modern Christendom that casts a similar shadow to what James is referring to - celebrity sports people or famous actor testimonies, that purport to carry more weight than the testimony of just about everyone else. When famous people speak on any topic, the "common people" listen intently and thus give credence to what they are saying. Just last month, Leonardo DiCaprio (famous Hollywood actor) was made an "Ambassador of Peace" and asked to address the UN Caucus on Global Warming, and even though he began his speech with "I am no expert", his "testimony" was listened to intently because of his leftist views on this controversial subject. It did not seem to matter that he flew in his one of his own private jets to get there, and owns a fuel guzzling yacht and more than one huge house, as long he was telling everyone else they need to conserve fuel and think of the environment, and should be happy to pay high taxes to help the governments of the world "save the planet".

The same sort of impact is attempted when famous athletes or TV stars are asked to address large TV churches or be a guest on a "Christian" talk show. Even though many (not all) of these celebrities profess to be believers with deep convictions when they know a camera is on; their escapades in the news often reveal a character flaw

that is decidedly not Christian. Even if their publicized millionaire lifestyles do not live up to the biblical values they claim to live out, church people tend to take more notice of their 20 minute speech than the day by day testimonies of real Christians living out biblical perseverance right in their midst. This is a modern wrinkle on what James is referring to.

Kent Hughes briefly traces the history of how the Methodist church was established by John Wesley in the 1700's. It was this very issue of the mistreatment of poor church goers that became the impetus for that event. The Church of England had become elitist and the common man was not welcome in services alongside shopkeepers, lawyers and bankers, so John Wesley took to the graveyards and coal mines to preach the gospel to those not welcome in his home church. With reluctance, he began the Methodist – Episcopal Church.^{iv}

Ironically, about 100 years later, Methodist William Booth realised that the poorest and most degraded people were never in church. His attempts to bring in scores of these people was met with great disdain by the Methodist Church and so, he and his wife Catherine were expelled from that church and after 14 years of living in poverty themselves, they founded the Salvation Army^v.

In James's time, the reaction of the church was to make the rich person very comfortable. They were given the best seats and were fussed over, while the poor person was told to "*stand over there*" or "*sit at my feet*" – the position of a servant. It was made very obvious that they were not really welcome in that church.

There should be a tendency among believers, to realise the great depth of depravity that God pulled us up out of as individuals when He saved us. I Corinthians 1:18-31 is a humbling passage that reminds us that we, of all people should not be partial in our assessment of other people – souls for whom Christ died. Notice these verses regarding the poor: Psalm 12:5; Prov. 14:31; 19:17; 21:13; 22:22-23; Lev. 19:15.

Vernon Doerksen comments,

"The Gospel has always made a strong appeal to those who are poor in earthly goods...That should not be construed to mean that all the poor will be saved, nor does it mean that there is anything meritorious in poverty; but it does affirm that the poor are not at a disadvantage to accept the salvation provided by the Lord. It vividly demonstrates that those so often rejected by man have been chosen by God."^{vi}

Verse 4 summarises the problem – "*you have become judges with evil thoughts and made distinctions.*" Rather than recognise everyone's need to hear God's gospel and worship Him in community (cf. "*your assembly*" = ecclesia / church), the people at these churches set a bar for acceptance into their midst that was far higher than Jesus' own standard and God is simply not pleased with those who usurp His authority in His church, especially those who had been gloriously saved and should have understood God's grace. What does Christian love for others mean if we personally or corporately create categories where we will not offer it?

II. Fawning Over the Rich Makes No Sense James 2:5-7

Again, James is extremely practical and his applications are almost immediate, even though these verses offer a sort of generality in vv. 6-7. But verse 5 reminds James's readers of their own indebtedness to God's impartiality when He chose them. Although I Corinthians was not written yet by Paul when James wrote this letter, he presages the passage we just read from I Cor. 1:18-31. God tends to choose the poor, both in spirit (Matt. 5:3) and in the world's goods, and in fact, Jesus claims in Matthew 19:23-26 that wealth is a barrier that makes it difficult for one to respond to the Gospel, unless God acts (that of course, is true for all who are saved, no matter their economic status).

James reminds them of God's promises to those who love Him – that they will be rich in faith (eternally much more important than being rich in money) and heirs of the Kingdom (Rom. 8:17); the very thing believers look forward to and hold onto by our faith, because this Christian life well-lived often results in persecution, suffering, grief and death. (in fact, II Tim. 3:12 tells us that “*those who live godly will suffer persecution*”) We long for the end of things like persecution and suffering so we must remember that all who are saved long for those things to end too. That is especially true of those whose lives are less comfortable than most of ours. In many cases, that's all they long for – cf. Romans 8:18-25.

Like vv. 6-7, there is a mention of a similar problem in the church at Corinth in I Cor. 6:1-11. Those who tend to institute lawsuits to recover property lost or to be paid back for a perceived offense are those who can afford to enter such costly proceedings. In James's world, that was the rich. The church was dishonoring the poor in their assembly and placing their honour on the very class of people who would drag them into court and even blaspheme the name of Christ.

Favoritism is completely worldly and follows the world's idea that the rich & famous are somehow better than everyone else, and their opinions matter more than even experts on some particular subject. In the church, such worldly standards are to be ignored because God's grace is the great equalizer – bringing both poor and rich out of the misery they faced before He saved them, because of being under His wrath and condemnation – cf. Rom. 8:1. It is especially foolish to favour those who later on would turn on you and take you to court and slander your Saviour's name because of some offense you had caused them.

Globally speaking, the vast multitudes of people are poor by North American standards. Many are concerned not by the ability to be upwardly mobile, but in finding enough food to survive another day. Yet, those in power - often corrupt, idealistic regimes, selfishly and politically divert assistance away from those in dire need to put it into their own pockets. That sort of thinking ought not to found in any form within Christ's church. Often, those among us in the greatest physical need – who tend to cling too much – are those whom we tend to avoid with our eyes and feet, to ensure we don't start to get feeling obligated to be their friend or help them,

knowing that for such people, such a commitment may end up being a full time job. That's our human nature doing the thinking. But we are to be Spirit-led. "The abuse of the poor can be passive and may be seen in the total lack of regard the wealthy show to them. In the Roman world, the poor were faceless nothings in the eyes of the wealthy."^{vii}

On top of the wealthy shunning lowly brothers – the poor – they were also known to blaspheme the name of Jesus Christ, that name which gives Christians our identity. James does not spell out for us what these blasphemies entailed specifically, but perhaps, in the context of the early church era, rich Jews slandered Christians because of their claims about the exclusivity of Christ, for their dedicated worship of only Christ, and their determined plan to follow Him alone and obey His teachings.^{viii}

III. The Royal Command

James 1:8-13

Read Matthew 22:34-40. Christ said that loving others, your neighbours, as yourselves is equal to loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. In saying this, He was re-affirming the OT verses Deut. 6:5 & Lev. 29:18, rather than the Ten Commandments to answer the inquiry of a lawyer, whose intention (v. 34) was to have Jesus commit to one of the ten, whereby His enemies could point out that He was ignoring or marginalizing the other 9, and thus confound His teaching. But James instead points to the 2 commandments that Jesus used to summarize the 10 commandments, in fact, Jesus claimed these two commands on their own summarized the whole intent of God's moral law, thus surprising the Pharisees while truthfully answering the lawyer's question. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in LK 10:25-37, Jesus' exchange with another lawyer, He displays the meaning of "your neighbour", and again, a surprising revelation is given that went way beyond what the Pharisees would have ever considered, and their hypocrisy is thereby exposed, something that James is attempting to deal with here in his letter.

There may be a bit of irony here in v. 8. "If you really fulfill the royal law according to Scripture ..." (IOW – the law of our King). Because scripture is clear that no one has ever successfully perfectly kept the law of God with the lone exception of Jesus (Romans 1-3). According to Gal. 3:24, Paul tells us that the OT law was intended to be a "schoolmaster" to lead us to Christ. It is to bring us to an end of ourselves and prepare us to receive God's grace, then, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we can begin to (still imperfectly) love God and other people as the law demands, although the perfection required to keep the law has been done on our behalf by Christ, and is then imputed to us. That is the only way that we can acquire that standing before God. (cf. Romans 3:19-20)

The act or inactivity of not observing this command to love your neighbour carries the consequence of sinning, becoming a transgressor of the law. Some might argue, "but I am not under the law, I am under grace" – cf. Rom. 5:20-6:14. If grace meant nothing you ever did from that moment of justification on was sinful, then how would any believer ever have anything to confess? Note Rom. 6:6 specifically. Since James

identifies this attitude as sin, we must treat it accordingly and make sure we don't commit it by showing partiality.

By now, you may have surmised that James is leading us to a climactic point, which he will arrive at by vv. 14-17. He has been developing the foundation for this conclusion from chapter 1 on. By the time we arrive at v. 14, hopefully, we will have been prepared to understand this not as an heretical viewpoint of works salvation, but is a very practical conclusion based on what precedes it, and a springing off point for what follows in the rest of the letter. For James, our works are not the basis of our salvation, but the direct result of it. Genuine faith inevitably results in good works, and if good works are not evident in one's life to some measurable degree, then it is safe to conclude that this one does not possess genuine faith.

Brian Vickers offers some insight on this point;

"Ultimately the law regulated the ways that Israel was to worship, serve, and live for the Lord. It was not simply a matter of keeping this or that law, but a total way of life. It is not a list of things to do or avoid so much as a vision of what it means to live as the people of God. Far from being a practical guide for living, and apart from Israel's inability to keep it, the law informed, defined, regulated, maintained, and sustained the life of the people of God. It was his law for his people. The unity in the law, which directs attention to the intended unity of life, speaks to James's insistence that to break one commandment is to break all the commandments (James 2:10), and to Paul's point that taking on one command brings responsibility to keep all commands (Gal. 5:3)."^{ix}

Since v. 10 begins with "For"- an explanation word connecting v. 9 with v. 10 - it thus gives the reason why v. 9 says what it says. This sentence equates 1 sin with the breaking of the whole law! This concept is tough to grasp, especially by North American readers, but James's statement and explanation is practical and biblical, and from an evangelistic viewpoint, somewhat critical. There are 2 main ways that James's statement can be seen to be true:

1. The law is a unit. It is not a series of by-laws like we see in a city, province or country, where you can be convicted of robbery, or illegal parking, but not sentenced for murder, speeding and fraud at the same time. When a human prosecutor "throws the book at you", the censure of the law is confined to the specific statute(s) broken by you.

However, the breaking of God's law – specifically here with regard to a partial or biased loving of people – is not limited to that specific transgression but draws down the wrath of the lawgiver and judge based on the weight of the whole law. – cf. Gal. 3:10; MT 5:19. I've heard this illustrated this way; think of the law as having been written on a pane of glass, with no frame set between the panes. If you throw a rock through that glass, and even hit directly on one specific spot, the whole pane of glass shatters.

2. Obedience to God's law defines our relationship with God, so a broken law breaks that relationship (even if only temporarily in the case of a believer). This is seen in Psalms 51:1-17 and Psalms 32:1-11. David has sinned greatly – adultery, murder – and his sin, since he has not yet confessed it or repented of

it, is causing untold harm to his spiritual well-being as a believer. He had not lost his salvation but (51:3) his sin was “ever before him”; he (51:5) sees himself as nothing but a sinner since his birth; he feels (51:8) like God has broken all his bones; he is fearful (51:11-12) of God’s presence leaving him and the Holy Spirit being taken away from him; his non-confession gave him physical pain (32:3-4); then finally, (32:5) he confessed his sin and was forgiven.

So, although our sin is serious, and not bringing it to God has consequences that remove our joy (Ps. 51:12), if we are truly saved, God will forgive and restore us to fellowship (Romans 8:1). The standard we are to strive for as believers is holiness, and although we will never achieve perfect holiness this side of our glorification, we are not to live apart from the attempt to be holy, and to bolster that idea, tied directly to our perseverance is Hebrews 12:14: *“Strive for peace with everyone, and for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* Either you are obedient or you are not. Partial obedience is disobedience.

James moves to a biblical example using two of the cardinal sins – among the worst humans can commit – adultery and murder – whether you commit one or the other, even if you leave one undone and even un-thought of, you have still broken God’s law. Here’s the main point: “If people pick and choose what they obey, then they are still very much their own God. All commands are united by this principle: God gave them. If we say, “I will follow the law about murder, but I will not follow the law about adultery”, then we are saying we will obey laws that *we judge to be sound*. If we obey laws that seem right to us, then we obey only when a law *passes our judgment or suits our purpose*. This approach forgets that God gave every law. It enthrones the self. Thus, if we disobey any law, we disobey God; *we are rejecting Him* as Lord and lawgiver.”^x (emphasis mine) – Brian Vickers

In vv. 12-13, *“So speak and so act...”* is a phrase that should remind us of James 1:22, *“Be doers of the word and not hearers only.”* But then James finishes the sentence in a way that takes us aback perhaps, *“...as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty”*. What does James mean by this?

Douglas Moo explains;

“James returns to the dominant theme in this section of the letter: the need for believers to validate the reality of their “religion” by “doing” the word (1:22). But a new twist is added here. For the first time, James warns about eschatological judgment and suggests that conformity to the demands of the law will be the criterion of that judgment. He therefore anticipates the controversial teaching of 2:14-26, where he argues that “doing” (“works”) is necessary if one wants to experience God’s justifying verdict.”^{xi}

Further, Moo also says,

“God’s gracious acceptance of us does not end our obligation to obey Him; it sets it on a new footing. No longer is God’s law a threatening, confining burden. For the will of God now confronts us with a law of liberty – an obligation we discharge in the joyful knowledge that God has both liberated us from the penalty of sin and given us, in His Spirit, the power to obey His will. To use James’s own description, this law is “an implanted word”, “written on our hearts; that has the power to save us.”^{xii}

The knowledge that God is our judge, and that judgment will come, is meant to infuse us with a strength of character which allows us to overcome (in ESV – conquer) – a concept prominent in Jesus’s 7 letters to the churches in Revelation 2 – 3^{xiii}. Now this judgment of believers is not the GWTJ of Rev. 20, but the Bema Seat judgment of I Cor. 3:12-15. Note these texts: II Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:12 & Matt. 12:36-37. Our actions will be judged by our motives – what was in our hearts as we did what we did?

Bryan Chapell, in his excellent book, “Holiness by Grace”, comments,
 “God’s actions on our behalf free us from human limitations in satisfying His law, and from obligations to human legislation. Our acceptance with God does not hinge on our meeting legal standards of any sort, divine or human. We naturally wonder, does this unconditional acceptance mean that God has no concern for standards? Are we free from all divine law? The apostle Paul answers by saying that, though God rejects the law of merit, He affirms the law of love. In this understanding, Paul echoes Jesus’ words, “If you love Me, you will obey what I command” (JN 14:15).”^{xiv}

James has already used this term, “law of liberty” in 1:25, and that verse carries with it the idea of one who recognises God’s law, as revealed by Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, thus, the NT view of the law and its attendant blessings and refinements. Those who follow Him become persons that persevere, acting on what we see as God’s requirements (these are not mere suggestions) for righteous holy living. That is the person who will be blessed. Here now in 2:12, perhaps even with a nod to Matt. 25:31-46 by James, inaction or contravention of God’s law leads to judgment.

Verse 13 is then connected by the word, “for”, so it is an explanation of v. 12. It is also a close parallel for Matt. 7:2 – *“For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”* See also Romans 2:1 – *“Therefore you have no excuse O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.”* It boils down to this: “those who are forgiving can expect forgiveness and those forgiven are expected to forgive.”^{xv}

I also see in this a connection to David’s statement in Ps. 51:16-17, where David refers to his sin, now exposed, but for which he has asked forgiveness and he understands that simply offering up sacrifice for it is not as valuable as repentance and a broken, contrite heart. In that sense, mercy triumphs over judgment because the mercy being sought is God’s mercy.

But how does that operate? James is talking to believers and we should know that this occurs by a profound process, that of repentance and faith in God – by God’s extending of grace to us initially and every subsequent day of our lives. We fail to remain faithful from time to time, sometimes miserably, yet God’s grace & mercy triumph over the judgment we deserve – in the specific case of what James is referring to here – by being biased against certain people, ie. judging them.

“When a true believer strives to obey and fails, the final word is still grace. For that reason, a sinning, failing Christian never despairs, never descends into self-

recrimination. Through Christ, we are united to the triune God. The one who demands mercy shows mercy. For disciples, God's mercy is always His last word."^{xvi}

ⁱ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans Pillar Commentary, 2000, p. 98

ⁱⁱ Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace Through Faith*, P & R Publishers, 2013, pg. 145

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, *James – Faith That Works*, Crossway, 1991, p. 89

^{iv} IBID, p. 88

^v IBID, pp. 88-89

^{vi} Vernon Doerksen, cited by David Jeremiah, *Turning Toward Integrity*, David C. Cook, 2004, P. 66

^{vii} David Nystrom, *James – NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, 1997, pp. 116-117

^{viii} Daniel M. Doriani, *James*, P & R, 2007, p. 65

^{ix} Vickers, IBID, pg. 101

^x IBID, pp. 73-74.

^{xi} Moo, p. 116

^{xii} IBID, p. 117

^{xiii} Revelation 2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21

^{xiv} Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace*, Crossway Books, 2001, p. 121

^{xv} Dan G. McCartney, *James – Baker Exegetical Commentary NT*, 2009, pp. 150-151

^{xvi} Doriani, p. 77