

A Study in James

The Tests of a Living Faith

James 2:1–13

January 25, 2013

Introduction

As we venture into the second chapter of James, we are starting to see an unfolding tapestry of how a living faith responds to various situations in life. James continues this theme by addressing the issue of partiality or discrimination. The specific example used in the text involves the rich and the poor, but the biblical principle could be applied to all manner or classes of people. Put simply, prejudice on the basis of wealth, race, gender, color, age, or culture is wrong.

At the same time, not all partiality is bad. By saving a person, God shows partiality toward believers in a way that unbelievers will never know. Also, when we show respect for someone like our parents, we are being partial toward them in a way that is different from a sibling. We must recognize the difference between good and bad kinds of partiality. James now examines how a believer's faith should respond in matters of partiality.

Test #3: A Living Faith and Partiality (2:1–13)

In this third test, James calls upon believers to demonstrate a living faith by being impartial. To do otherwise is not only sinful, but will also bring about God's judgment (v. 12).

Prohibition of Partiality (v. 1)

In verse 1, you can see the direct connection between faith and impartiality. We cannot hold both the faith and partiality at the same time. The two are incompatible. The phrase "hold the faith" refers objectively to the body of truth that genuine Christians believe. This faith must be personally held by an individual to be called a Christian.

James mentions this faith in connection with Jesus Christ, "the Lord of glory." As believers, we should be so blinded by the glory of the Lord that we are unable to see distinctions based on the appearance of others.

An Illustration of Partiality (vv. 2–4)

The example James gives involves two visitors who come to a public worship service. The wealth of the rich man is evident from his apparel, likewise for the poor man. But wealthy man is given preferential treatment while the poor man is despised. Verse 4 indicates that this is a situation that was occurring among James's readers. They needed to *stop* this kind of behavior.

Now think about this situation in terms of the test. The outward behavior is an evidence of the inward reality. Since James is addressing believers, it is clear that their outward partiality did not match an inward living faith. They needed to repent of this sin, confess it to the Lord, and start acting in an impartial manner characteristic of a living faith.

The point of this illustration is that we need to view people as God views them. Both of these men were visitors, meaning they were likely *unbelievers*! They were both sinners in need of a Savior. And that puts them both on a level playing field. The same is true for believers too! We should not judge a brother or sister based solely on external appearance. Those who are singled out for positions of leadership in the assembly should be selected on the basis of their godly character, not on external factors like their wealth or secular job.

Reasons for the Prohibition of Partiality (vv. 5–13)

As with the previous tests, James does not leave us without a rationale for obeying the command to be impartial. He gives us two reasons for this: partiality is contrary to God's perspective and His law.

Partiality is Contrary to God's Perspective (vv. 5–7)

God does not look down upon the poor. In fact, many poor people were chosen by God to be saved. This does not mean "poor in spirit." Rather, these people are economically poor.

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul tells us that not many of the believers will be rich here in this life. What is the implication of that? The majority of believers will be from the *poor* class of people. This doesn't mean that being poor automatically qualifies you for salvation. It simply means that in terms of sheer numbers, the vast majority of believers will be of humble means in this life. The tremendous promise in this verse is that their fortunes will be reversed in the coming kingdom. Many poor

believers will gain great spiritual riches in heaven. Just think of the reversal of fortune with the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16).

In verses 6 and 7, we can see God's perspective on the rich. Generally speaking, the rich are those who oppress the poor. They hire expensive lawyers and drag poor people into court who cannot afford an adequate defense. Many rich people also trust in their riches and shake their fist at God and His followers. Since that is the case, why should believers want to show the rich partiality? Those who think that being preferential to the rich will improve their personal economic situation may be right...but their gain comes at the expense of those who are poor!

Here is where we need to be careful to not overextend James' point. He is not arguing for some kind of reverse discrimination. The modern Liberation Theology movement has taken these verses and turned them into a kind of class warfare. But we are not to despise the rich! Nor should we show preference toward the poor *because* they are poor (Lev 19:15). The rich need a Savior just as much as the poor. Additionally, there are many godly rich people and many wicked poor people. We need to be seeing people as God sees them.

In 1 Samuel, the Israelites chose Saul as their king based on his outward appearance. But inwardly he was wicked. Later, God chose David to be king because he was "a man after God's own heart." While outwardly he was not much to look at, he demonstrated his godly character by trusting in God to defeat Goliath (1 Sam 17). Thus David showed to the people what only God could see previously. We need to have the same kind of discerning eyes as the Lord.

Partiality is Contrary to God's Law (vv. 8–13)

The royal law in verse 8 is the law which belongs to the kingdom and its Regent, Jesus Christ. As we discussed previously, the Law of Christ includes everything that Jesus and the apostles taught, both in word and deed. Partiality is contrary to this law. And since the centerpiece of the law of Christ is the gospel, partiality is also contrary to the gospel.

The Law of Love (vv. 8–11)

Jesus summed up the Old Testament law in two commandments: love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Every other commandment stems from these two. While we are not under the Old

Testament law today, we *are* under the law of Christ. And similarly, Christ's law also hangs on these two great commandments. Those who show impartiality, as the gospel demands, will do well and be rewarded. Those who show partiality toward their neighbor are acting in sin (v. 9).

The point of verses 8–11 is that we cannot call ourselves Christians and still cling to a “little” prejudice — of whatever sort! Whether it's against rich or poor, black or white, men or women — whatever...it is sin! And those who break the law are called *lawbreakers*.

Think of the law like a window or mirror. If you smash a small hole in one corner of the window, you cannot patch the hole and call it fixed. The whole thing must be replaced! Similarly, it doesn't matter if we've broken just one part of the law of Christ. A person showing partiality is just as guilty as a murderer or adulterer. Any violation will make us a lawbreaker. Our whole person needs “fixing.” And that's where we find such comfort in the gospel! Jesus saves us *completely* and reckons righteousness to our account when we believe in Him.

The Law of Mercy (vv. 12–13)

God's law is also based on mercy. Those who are called by God to salvation have been shown a great mercy. They, in turn, are also called upon to show mercy to others. We are called upon to be impartial to the poor person who enters our assembly. This act is a way of showing mercy to the poor. The poor rarely receive impartial treatment in society. We can extend them this mercy when they come into our worship services.

As believers, we will be judged by the “law of liberty.” This is the gospel — the law that brings freedom from sin and death. It sets the standard by which we are measured and partiality does not measure up. In Matthew 5:7, Jesus teaches us that the merciful will receive mercy from God. That is not a formula for getting saved. Rather, it is another outward evidence of an inner reality. Those who have been shown mercy in salvation will show mercy to the poor and others by being impartial. If we are not measuring up to this standard, we need to repent of this sin, confess it to the Lord, and start walking in accord with the gospel which liberated us from sin and death!

~AWB