

The Sin of Partiality

James 2:1-13

When you think of a faithful and thriving church, what comes to mind? Churches elevate youth programs, liturgy, mission, education, outreach to the poor, doctrinal maturity, music and many other things that are good in themselves. James says that in order to grow up into Christ we must fulfill the royal law of Scripture and love our neighbor as ourselves, whoever they are. The sin of partiality never makes the list of the most deadly sins, but James calls it out as a deep rejection of the grace of God.

Summary of the Text

Brothers and sisters in Christ should not practice their faith with partiality, loving some people but not others (v. 1). If a powerful and well-dressed man comes to church and you offer him your seat, but when a poor man comes in you ask him to stand sit beneath you, you become a judge with evil thoughts (vv. 2-4). Hasn't God given great faith to poor people who will inherit the kingdom (v. 5)? The recipients have dishonored the poor even while the rich persecute them in the courts and blaspheme the name of Christ (vv. 6-7). The royal law of Scripture is to love your neighbor as yourself (v. 8). To show partiality is to break it and be convicted by the law as transgressors (v. 9). The law is not like a 100-question test where you can miss a few and get an A. It's like a cup of drinking water that can't have any waste, or a picture window that's ruined by any hole (v. 10). To avoid adultery while committing murder still classifies you as a transgressor (v. 11). This being the case, speak and live as someone who will be judged by the law of liberty (v. 12). Love your neighbor as you want to be loved. If you are merciless, you will not receive mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment (v. 13).

Playing Favorites

James writes to exiles, people who left their homes and livelihoods because of persecution (1:1; Acts 8:1). They lost a lot and would understandably be eager to receive help and protection. In comes to church a guy with rings of authority and dressed in fine robes (v. 1). Should he get a better seat? We get more details in verses 6-7, that these rich men drag them into courts and blaspheme the name by which Christians are called. Persecution is not a clean, singular event. These Jewish Christians went into new communities and faced the same things that got them kicked out of their old ones, which is why James emphasizes faithfulness in trials producing patience which then leads to maturity (1:3-4). This isn't so simple as "Don't be a money-grubbing climber, nice to rich people and rude to the poor." You can imagine what it would be like to have someone come to church who could relieve persecution or increase it based on their experience in the building, among the people. They might expect favoritism: "Why are these commoners sitting in the nice seats while I am back here?" The desire for peace and stability is reasonable and good, but easy to go bad. There's also pressure from inside the church. "Why didn't you get this guy a better seat? Now he's going to vote against us and continue to blaspheme the name of Christ." Should these Christians welcome rich and powerful people into worship? Is it a sin to let them attend? Of course not. But they should get no special treatment. Jesus, the Lord of glory, did not favor rich people. He didn't choose to be with the powerful. He didn't take bribes and offers to stop persecution if He would go along with the agenda of the well-connected. But He also did not reject rich people simply because they had money. He said it's hard for a rich man to get into the kingdom of heaven, but with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:23). People with big homes hosted the early church and were an enormous blessing (Acts 18:7, Rom. 16:5).

Ruling like Royals

God is an impartial judge (1 Pet. 1:17; Rom. 2:11). He requires us to judge impartially: "*You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor*" (Lev. 19:15). This courtroom context illustrates the principle that we must apply everywhere,

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which is how the commandments work. You are not to bear false witness under oath but also when your mom asks you a question, all in keeping with the 9th Commandment. James makes us think by asking if partiality turns us into “*judges with evil thoughts*” (v. 4). How so? Where we were supposed to be looking to love and bless the one in need, we became self-seeking manipulators. When we should have been judging and weighing how to give, we entered in the calculus of how to get. Jesus said, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:3), but by ignoring them we deny Jesus and the coming of His kingdom. The recipients of James’ letter were favoring blasphemers over the Lord’s poor, like Joseph and Mary. The sin against the poor is obvious, but it’s also a sin against the rich. Jesus loved the rich young ruler enough to tell him the truth and send him away sad (Mk. 10:21-22). If you were rich and alienated from Christ, how would you want to be treated by people who know Him? Flattered and coddled, or loved and told the truth? We apply this to our lives. Do you only talk to people who are like you, whose interests line up with yours, who can help you with your station and calling in life? You can hear James echoing the Lord Jesus: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect*” (Matt. 5:43-48). The royal law of Scripture, the law of liberty sets us free to love like Christ, to see Him in the person in front of us.

The Triumph of Mercy

The sin of partiality favors certain sins. You can favor the rich or the poor. You can call men to repentance and avoid calling out women. You can rail against the sins of women and avoid the men. You can enable the sins of your wife or your husband because you’re afraid of conflict. You can have a church free of obvious scandal, free of open hostility and immorality, where there is no hot gospel because there is no zealous love for God, the kind that drives James’ letter. We don’t get to minimize our own sins and maximize the sins of others. The murderer doesn’t get to say, “At least I’m not an adulterer.” We are all transgressors of the law (v. 11). When James says, “For He who said”, he is talking about Jesus who convicts everyone of murder and adultery in the heart (Matt. 5:21-30). Those reading this letter for first time were guilty and therefore told: “*So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty*” (v. 12). Don’t go on a spree of condemnation, and don’t avoid people—it would be easiest just to stay away from the rich and poor! “Sorry, James, I’m not sure what you mean.” He says to seek mercy for your sins and show mercy to others. Don’t be partial to those who can bless you, but care for the one whom Christ has put before you.