

Show Mercy Not Partiality
James 2:1-13
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Read James 2:1-13

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4b)

Introduction

I remember talking to my brother and my dad back when we were all working at churches (my dad has since retired), and my brother mentioned that he had a few professional golfers in his church since they were near a university with a great golf program. I mentioned that the church that I was in had some published authors, a professional runner, and a girl who had been on American Idol. My dad trumped us both with, “Remember when we had a whole row of Pittsburgh Steelers players at our church in Pittsburgh? I miss those days.” We weren’t really competing, but he won. But then in 2012, I was living in Northern Virginia and the Washington Redskins football team drafted two quarterbacks - Robert Griffin III (RG3) and Kirk Cousins. And not only was RG3 the pride of my alma mater, Baylor University, and a Heisman Trophy winner, but I had heard that both of them were solid Christians. And even though our church wasn’t really close to DC, a lot of the players lived near us, and then I found out that both of them were attending the big evangelical church in our town. So I started hoping, I might have even prayed about it more than once, that they would get tired of the big flashy church, and find their way over to our smaller PCA church where they could get fed and grow in their walks with Jesus better. Of course, we would downplay it and protect them from people running over to get their autographs. I was just thinking of what was best for them, not what would make me look or feel good... yeah, right. It never happened, which is probably a good thing.

I think I’ve told this story before, and I don’t like to use the name, but a really cool, hip church in New York City had a few years where they attracted a lot of celebrities and movers and shakers. And the pastor himself became a minor celebrity, posting pictures on Instagram of him hanging out with Justin Bieber. And it was well-known at that church that celebrities got to sit up front during the services and then hang with the pastors backstage, as if it was an awards show. It’s not a lot different from the Christian Scientists who specifically target celebrities like Tom Cruise and John Travolta and give them preferential treatment, so they’ll bring “credibility” to their church. And James, the brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem church, the author of this book that we’re studying, would throw up about all of that. He would question our priorities, reminding us that the ground at the foot of the cross is level and that God is no respecter of persons. Today’s passage is his rebuke of treating people in the church differently based on their social status. The first four verses remind us that unfortunately,

I. Favoring the Rich Comes Naturally (vv. 1-4)

¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

When you think of this situation that James describes – a rich man and a poor man both walking into the church assembly – we tend to picture a church today. And it would be natural for visitors

to our churches today to just sit in whatever pew or seat they chose. But remember that the early churches met in houses, so there is a real dimension of hospitality there. Someone walking into a house to attend a meeting of this fairly new phenomenon, a worship gathering of Christians, would have needed help knowing what to do and where to sit. And so it was an easy situation for the leaders or the hosts to show their true colors when greeting people – whether they genuinely treated everyone equally or if they favored the VIPs. Did they really internalize and practice Galatians 3:28 – “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

We need to remember how different James’ world was to ours, at least here in America. One commentator said that from what we can glean from the Roman world at the time, “perhaps 8 percent of the population had wealth, another 2 percent were gaining it, and the remaining 90 percent lived in” poverty. There was virtually no middle class as we understand that term and there almost no possibility of social or economic advancement; there was no “American Dream” of going from rags to riches.¹ The culture of that time was filled with prejudice, hatred, slavery, and class divisions. The unity of the early church was shocking to that society when they treated everyone equally. But it was easy for churches to lose sight of how radically counter-cultural they were called to be and default to how the rest of society acted. Good thing we’re not like that today, right? We in America definitely still bow to the rich and powerful. Rich people can buy favor in basically every other area of life: front row seats to sporting matches, first class, VIP lounges, membership to the most exclusive clubs. It’s one of the ironies of being a celebrity that by the time you become rich and famous and can buy everything you need and most anything you want, that’s when people start giving you free stuff, asking you to wear their clothes and endorse their products.

What is partiality? The Greek word translates as literally “receiving the face.” In other words, making judgments and distinctions based on appearances, for outward reasons.² In James’ example, the way the men dressed made it abundantly clear what their status was. Christians should not favor one person over another based on their face, their clothes, or anything else external. Now, there is a place for honor and respect to be shown: the Bible says respect the king, government officials, older men and women, and so forth. It is not those demonstrations of respect that is being condemned but prejudice and favoritism. Rich people should not be able to buy favor in the church, we should not automatically give them positions of influence that they have not earned, and we should not be prejudiced against those with little money or standing. And it’s not just for the poor that we need to guard against favoritism. Many rich people get tired of being used and exploited for their money or their names. If they come into our churches and we treat them no differently than their fans or companies who want to benefit from being associated with them, we have revealed a little too clearly our view of the church as a social club. And we’ve forgotten that Jesus is the head of the church and that the gospel humbles us.

I remember a conversation with someone who has a lot of experience with church building campaigns, and they said that for your campaign to be successful, you generally need a lead gift worth 25% of the whole amount. So, if you’re raising \$4 million for a building, you need to know someone who will buy in and give the first million. That takes a seriously wealthy person to have an extra million lying around to donate. So there’s always been a yearning to get wealthy and important people into our churches because then we can easily make our budgets, build bigger buildings, and attract more people. And there’s just something exciting about having successful

¹ David P. Nystrom, *James: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 123.

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 87.

people feel that your church is worth being part of. But we should be just as excited about any human being who is saved by the grace of God and wants to worship with us. We will be worshipping side-by-side for all of eternity, so it doesn't matter if they live on food stamps or belong to a country club. In every other context, the poor are ignored or judged harshly; if there's one place that they should be welcomed as equals, it should be at the place where we all acknowledge that we are sinners saved by grace.

As we move on, the next three verses build on the first four by saying that

II. Favoring the Rich Makes No Sense (vv. 5-7)

⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

James is very direct in this passage, he doesn't mince words as he's pointing out an area that had the potential to do great damage to the early church's reputation and witness to their communities, not to mention angering God. And you could expect him to be mad, really scolding them. But what does he call them? *"My beloved brothers."* He's gentle and tender with them, he really wants them to get this right. He's gone from a hypothetical example of a rich man and a poor man both walking into church, to saying that the reality is that the poor are much more likely to be part of church while the rich are more likely to be opposing Christianity. Now, when Christianity is in favor in a community, as it was in the Roman Empire after Constantine made it the official religion in the AD 300s, then everyone wants to be seen at church, the rich included. But in times of persecution or when Christianity is out of favor, if fame and fortune are your gods, you avoid the church.

James is echoing Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 that says that God disproportionately chooses the weak and impoverished:

"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Now, Paul was not saying that the early church only included poor people, or that the wealthy and influential were not worth trying to reach. Not many of you were wise, powerful, upper-class – some were, but the majority of the early church was poor and lowly; which is still true worldwide today. When Jesus said that it was harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, He quickly followed it up with *"but with God all things are possible"* (Matthew 19:26). In other words, the faith of self-denial that worships a crucified Savior and makes you others-centered was not naturally a strong sell to the rich and powerful; but God works salvation no matter what someone's net worth is.

And nowhere in the Bible does it go to the other extreme and automatically judge in favor of the poor. Leviticus 19:15 – *"You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor."* Impartiality does not mean you tip the scales the other way and favor the poor while insulting the rich. No, it means you treat everyone equally and when anyone - upper, middle, or lower class – wants to join the church and use their gifts, you bring them into membership when they have a credible profession of faith. And you ask and allow them to serve in the areas that they are gifted in. It may be uncomfortable for people who don't naturally rub shoulders to worship and minister together, and that too is a gift.

So, James is laying out the case for why favoring the rich makes no sense – for theological reasons because it stands in stark contrast to the attitude of God; but also for practical reasons - that the rich people were the ones who were persecuting them, dragging Christians into court and attacking them verbally. In the coming years, if real persecution comes for the American church, do you think it will come from the poor and lower class? Or will it come from the wealthy and powerful? I think that we would be in a situation similar to James' day.

The final six verses expand the theological implications that

III. Favoring the Rich Is a Serious Sin (vv. 8-13)

⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

What law are you breaking when you treat rich people better than poor? "*Love your neighbor as yourself*," which you'll remember is not one of the Ten Commandments; it's Jesus' summation of the law, second to love the Lord your God with all your heart soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:29-30). James calls it "the royal law" and "the law of liberty." And in failing the law in that one point, you break the whole thing! The law of God is a package deal. Yes, some sins have bigger consequences in our lives than others, but every sin is an offense against God and makes you a lawbreaker. We see that in all kinds of areas: if you are in perfect health, mentally sharp, six-pack abs, the picture of fitness, but one of your arteries clogs up, you could have a heart attack and die. One small failure brings the whole body down. When the Space Shuttle Columbia blew up in 2003, everything about the complicated systems in that ship was working perfectly except that debris from the external tank caused damage to the left wing's edge. Blew the whole thing up. And that's what James says: failing in one point of the law breaks the whole law. A Mafia hit man who is the model husband and father is still a murderer. A suburban housewife who commits adultery, doesn't get to hide behind the fact that she's never killed someone and claim innocence.

Matthew 5:7 says, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy*," and verse 13 is the other side of that coin: those who don't show mercy should expect to be judged without mercy. Mercy defines the gospel: Christ loved us even when we were unlovely and living as His enemies. He blessed us with salvation and forgiveness when we did not deserve it. When we really understand His mercy, how can we turn around and not show mercy to others? You do not want to be like the unmerciful servant of Matt 18. Remember him? His master was going to send him to prison for the ten thousand talents that he owed him – in today's money, that's over a hundred million dollars, basically unpayable. But he begged for mercy and the master cancelled his debt. But then he went and found the guy who owed him the equivalent of \$200 and threw him in prison. Jesus ends the parable saying that the master changed his mind and ended up throwing the man in prison, and then applying it to us: "*So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*"

Conclusion

As I was thinking about this passage as a whole, I thought how it's easy to forget how intimidating it is for people who weren't raised in church to attend a church for the first time. And to come to a church where there is a certain level of education, a certain level of wealth, a predominant socio-

economic culture – if they don't fit in, they're likely to only come once. I've heard of people driving up to a church (not ours), taking a look at the cars in the parking lot, and turning right around because they already sensed that they weren't going to measure up. Now, we can't do much about people's insecurities if they're that intense, there is one thing we can do – love and welcome them warmly, convince them by our actions and words that they do belong, that we want them here. I've heard from visitors that our church does a pretty good job of that, but let's collectively commit to never forgetting to make our neighbors who visit feel welcomed and loved here.

In his book *What Good Is God?*, Philip Yancey writes about being invited to speak at a conference on ministry to women in prostitution. After some discussion with his wife, Yancey agreed to accept the invitation as long as he could have the opportunity to hear their stories. At the end of the conference, he asked: "Did you know that Jesus referred to your profession? Let me read you what he said: '*I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.*' He was speaking to the religious authorities of his day. What do you think Jesus meant? Why did he single out prostitutes?" After several minutes of silence, a young woman from Eastern Europe spoke up in her broken English:

"Everyone... has someone to look down on. Not us. We are at the low. Our families, they feel shame for us. No mother nowhere looks at her little girl and says, 'Honey, when you grow up I want you be good prostitute.' Most places, we are breaking the law. Believe me, we know how people feel about us. People call us names... We are the bottom. And sometimes when you are at the low, you cry for help. So when Jesus comes, we respond. Maybe Jesus meant that."³

There was an old song by the singer Steve Taylor, "Jesus is for Losers." Some people might mean that as a put-down, but we should wear it as a badge of honor. Because we're all losers, every human being is a sinner who has earned a sentence of condemnation to hell. But most people have convinced themselves that they're OK, that they really haven't done enough to offend God and be separated from Him for all eternity. As long as you're not Hitler or Bin Laden, you're going to heaven. But that's not even close to the message of the Bible. The Gospel says that you have to realize how desperate your spiritual state is so that you can humble yourself and receive God's grace given through Jesus' atoning sacrifice on your behalf. You can't buy a ticket to heaven, you can't impress God enough to let you in; you can only accept His gift of grace.

Why is it so ridiculous for Christians to favor the rich over the poor? It's because of who our Lord is, verse one says He's the Lord of glory. He is at once the greatest, most glorious, most holy, exalted, every adjective you can shower on Him; but He was also lived as a poor man when He was here on earth. Jesus said, "*the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*" (Matt. 8:20). He gave up the riches and splendor of heaven to become homeless and poor in every sense of the word – for our sakes. If we serve the greatest One but He continually told us to seek out the poor and oppressed, there's something seriously wrong when we pander and give preferential treatment to the rich. We've kept the world's value system and forgotten how radically counter-cultural following Jesus is. May we continually remember God's value system and never treat anyone as greater or lesser because of the way the world ranks them. And all the losers who love Jesus said, "Amen."

Benediction - Psalm 121:7-8 - "*The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.*"

³ Philip Yancey, *What Good is God? In Search of a Faith That Matters* (Nashville: Jericho Books, 2013).