

Impartial Love

Bible Background • JAMES 2

Printed Text • JAMES 2:1-13 | Devotional Reading • MATTHEW 12:1-8

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will UNDERSTAND the difference between showing partiality and treating others equally, AFFIRM that all people are equally valued and loved by God, and PRACTICE James's call to fulfill the "royal law" of loving one's neighbor as oneself.

In Focus

Standing before the congregation in his freshly laundered white robe, Pastor Philip "opened the doors" to the church for the call to salvation. It was communion Sunday, his favorite ritual of the church. Two men came down to the altar to give their lives to Jesus Christ. One was well-dressed; the other man was unkempt. He obviously had not had a bath in weeks. The custom Pastor Philip had begun at the church was to have the congregation come and hug those who had just given their lives to Jesus Christ. With both men standing next to him and the unkempt man standing closest, Pastor Philip knew he would have to hug him. Pastor Philip's first thought was of his freshly laundered white robe. As he began to privately repent to Jesus, he turned to the man, welcomed him into the body of Christ, and fully embraced him, welcoming him to the church. Partiality contradicts loving one's neighbor as oneself.

What are some ways the body of Christ can genuinely embrace those not like us in order to show them God's love?

Keep in Mind

"I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." (Luke 10:36-37, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Respect [of person] (v. 1) *prosopolempsia* (Gk.) — Partiality

B. Vile (James 2:2) *rhuparos* (Gk.) — Dirty, cheap, or shabby

Say It Correctly

Zebedee. ZEH-buh-dee

KJV

James 2:1 My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.

2 For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment;

3 And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:

4 Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

6 But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?
7 Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?
8 If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well:
9 But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.
10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.
11 For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.
12 So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.
13 For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

NLT

James 2:1 My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others?
2 For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes.
3 If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, “You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor”—well,
4 doesn’t this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?
5 Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn’t God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren’t they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him?
6 But you dishonor the poor! Isn’t it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court?
7 Aren’t they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear?
8 Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”
9 But if you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law.
10 For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God’s laws.
11 For the same God who said, “You must not commit adultery,” also said, “You must not murder.” So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law.
12 So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free.
13 There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.

The People, Places, and Times

James. The New Testament mentions two people named James: James, the son of Zebedee, who was among the first disciples (Mark 1:19; 5:37; 9:2; 10:35); and James, the half-brother of Jesus, a prominent leader of the Jerusalem church (Mark 6:3; Acts 15:13–29; Galatians 2:1–14). The book was likely written in AD 46, but the son of Zebedee was martyred around AD 44 (Acts 12:2). The other James, who was not martyred until AD 62, therefore, is generally assumed to be the author of this letter. Even though the apostle James was a half-brother of Jesus Christ, he expressed his relationship to Jesus as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). He also identifies himself as a teacher (James 3:1). The book of James is referred to as one of the “catholic epistles” (i.e. universal letters) because it is not addressed to a particular church, but rather appears to be a general letter written to several churches. Many think it was written to Christians scattered throughout Palestine due to persecution, to believers whose behavior contradicted their faith in Jesus Christ (1:1, 2).

Background

James' epistle explains the love Christians are to show others in the world. His tone is direct and reflects the wisdom of a seasoned Christian. Although James does not directly quote Jesus, he uses phrases and ideas that originated with Jesus. In fact, much of what James has written shows a direct relationship to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The letter from James was written to people under pressure. Christians were suffering from economic persecution and oppression, and the church was struggling under the strain. In response to the difficulties they faced, James admonished believers to pull together and help one another. Otherwise, they would compromise with the world and become divided. Helping one another would have been the ideal choice, but these believers were more focused on the struggle to get ahead in the world. James has just informed his readers what pure religion was all about: serving those who are less fortunate—the orphans and the widows (James 1:27). The early Christians must not forget a primary function of the Church's ministry—to help the poor. Now James looks at some situations where professing Christians might not be living out their faith, beginning here with the rich and the poor.

At-A-Glance

1. Exhortation Against Favoritism (James 2:1-7)
2. Encouragement to Love (vv. 8-13)

In Depth

1. Exhortation Against Favoritism (James 2:1-7)

As a concerned leader of the Christian church, James begins with a warning about moral behavior to the believers: favoritism is unacceptable (v. 1). James uses the illustration of two men, one rich and one poor, who join in worship (v. 2). Partiality begins when the believer pays more attention to the man of higher status, offering him the best seat. At the same time, the poor man is directed to sit apart from the rest of the congregation (v. 3). James points out that the tendency to show a preference to those with prestige and position over the poor and less fortunate is incompatible with the teachings and actions of our Lord Jesus. Throughout the Bible, Jesus teaches His followers to love their neighbors as themselves. All should receive honor and concern equally. By preferring the rich, the believers were guilty of sin against Jesus Christ. After all, Jesus did give them the commandment that emphatically states the poor, who are so often dishonored and oppressed by the rich (vv. 6–7), are not only welcome but celebrated in the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:3). Since God honors the poor, they should not be dishonored by those who profess to be His children. Verse 7 explains that giving preference to those with status “blasphemes” the name of the Lord. The early Christians were rebuked for their behavior. Are we any different in our worship practices? If a homeless person comes into a church, how likely is it that he or she will be seated in the first row? If a famous person visited the church, how much attention would they get? Where would they be seated? Perhaps we would do well to heed James' warning in our worship settings.

How inclusive are today's churches?

2. Encouragement to Love (vv. 8-13)

James continues to teach by saying that it is not enough to merely tolerate poor people and refrain from mistreating them. Rather, believers must go farther and actively show love to the less fortunate, even as we love ourselves (v. 8). James continues to show the believers their harsh treatment of the poor also violated the law of love. James refers to this commandment as “the royal law” (cf. Leviticus 19:18). Often called the Golden Rule, this is a prevailing theme in Jesus' ministry and in early Christian teaching, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). Jesus requires us to put this command into action in our relationships with others.

James refers to those who commit favoritism as “transgressors,” which means God’s law has been broken (v. 9). As a result of committing one disobedient act against God, that individual becomes guilty of violating God’s law in its entirety (v. 10). The law of love, on the other hand, is a “law of liberty” (2:12). God’s love frees a person from speaking and acting foolishly. Love frees us from psychological enslavement to our enemies. And it frees us to help our friends. James ends this teaching by admonishing his readers to show their obedience and allegiance to God by speaking and acting toward one another with mercy because the day will come when all believers will receive their just reward. This is God’s way, and as believers, we have been given the mandate to follow God’s way of having mercy for others in order to receive mercy in return (v. 13).

Why can't a Christian just focus on loving God? Why is loving our neighbor/brother needed?

Search the Scriptures

1. What virtues does James attribute to the poor as a class of people (James 2:5)?
2. What is the royal law according to the Scriptures? (v. 8)
3. By what law shall believers be judged? (v. 12)
4. What virtue will rejoice against the judgment? (v. 13)

Discuss the Meaning

1. What should be the attitude of the believer toward the rich and the poor in our congregations?
2. What are some distinct ways believers in the church today mistreat members or visitors?

Liberating Lesson

In many metropolitan areas, it appears as if highways are built so that commuters don’t have to drive through poor communities. This strategy represents an extreme attempt to keep poor people trapped in a marginalized state where society can avoid the issue of improving their quality of life. But God has called His church to be impartial disciples who do not show partiality toward the rich. Instead, we are to fulfill God’s royal law and show the love of God to all people, treating everyone as we would like to be treated—with no respect to a person’s social status. To the extent that an unfortunate situation involving favoring the rich and ignoring the poor affects African Americans, and therefore African American Christians, we must soberly consider what we can do to help improve the economic conditions of poor neighborhoods. Why are people poor? Is there a way out of poverty? As a class, plan a project that can be used to meet a critical need of a specific family or wperson in the church.

Application for Activation

- At least three times this week make a sacrifice to show practical acts of love to someone. Ask God to lead you and then keep your eyes open for the opportunities. They will come.
- Do a self-evaluation to discover a time you judged someone unfairly. Repent and ask the Lord to help you fulfill James 2:13.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

James 2:1-13

1 My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.

The Palestine of James' day showed special consideration to the wealthy by giving them special rank and status. Such favoritism was often shown in legal matters, and even in the Jewish synagogue, where people were often seated according to their rank in society. Here James continues his admonitions from chapter 1 by instructing believers that they are to emulate the Lord Jesus Christ with regards to how they treat and view other people. James is trying to help believers understand that they were no longer to have the world's attitudes. They, as followers of Christ, were not to show personal favoritism. James makes it very clear that as believers who claim to have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, they must follow God's Word. He is taking a direct approach to the danger of showing respect of persons. The apostle Peter also brought out the truth that God Himself is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). How, then, can one claim to be a believer in Christ if that person displays behavior that is contrary to what our Lord expects? This is James' message to the church.

2 For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; 3 And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: 4 Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

James then gave an example of how believers might actually be showing favoritism toward people without even realizing it. By pointing out that they were "having respect" (Gk. epiblepo, eh-pee-BLEH-poe) for the rich man over the poor man, James was drawing upon a common practice in the temples and courts of his society. In ancient Rome, the wearing of gold rings and fine robes spoke to membership in an elite class that always received favored treatment in Roman courts. Since the synagogue had become the place that served both as the house of prayer and as the community court, some of this same kind of favoritism was creeping in there as well. James counseled believers against adopting such ways. The practice of showing such favoritism was strictly forbidden in Jewish law (cf. Leviticus 19:13), and it was contrary to the ideals established by the Lord Jesus Christ. James poses a scenario that illustrates what he is attempting to convey. Imagine two men coming into the church at the same time. These two people have extremely different appearances. One man is wearing fine clothing and a gold ring, and the other man is poorly dressed in tattered clothing. James suggests that if anyone offers the man who is well dressed a prominent seat while communicating to the poor man that he is unworthy and relegating him to a lesser seat, that person is exercising judgment based on outward appearances. James stresses this type of behavior is clearly unacceptable to God. James was forced to ask the question in verse 4, "Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?" "Partiality" (Gk. prosopolepteo, pro-soh-poe-layp-TEH-oh) means to make distinctions among people based on their rank and influence. The person who is guilty of such action has, in effect, made himself a judge of both the wealthy and the poor. These thoughts are in direct contradiction to God's Word. James rightfully states that such bias comes from an evil motive.

5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? 6 But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? 7 Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?

James asks a very serious question that believers of any era cannot avoid. His question makes his point very clear in verse 5. He reminds those that have a tendency toward showing favoritism that God, in His infinite wisdom, has favored those considered by the world to be poor. God has given to those who are considered the least in society the ability to be rich in faith. Having faith in God demonstrates a love for God; therefore, these circumstances are pleasing in God's sight and He has decreed that the poor will inherit His kingdom. There is a sense of bewilderment in James' voice as he asks believers how they could be guilty of despising the poor in the

same fashion that the rich did. The rich were the ones oppressing them and dragging them to court. By “despising” or treating poor believers with contempt and dishonor, they were showing by their actions that they had not really heard the Word of God. They were behaving just like the unsaved world around them, and that was unacceptable. James then reminds his hearers that the godless people they were emulating were the same ones who “blaspheme” the name of the very Lord to whom they had given themselves. Jesus Christ, who is worthy of reverence, has allowed believers to be identified with Him. James then directs his readers to consider their own situations and points out that the rich people are treating them the same way they are treating the poor.

8 If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well. 9 But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.

When Christ was asked to identify the greatest commandment, He said to love God with all their hearts, souls, and minds, and then to love their neighbors in the same way that they loved themselves (Matthew 22:37–40). James called this the “royal” law. It represents the whole law of God as revealed in Moses and stated by Jesus Christ. James affirms that fulfilling the royal law is pleasing to God because that person is showing genuine love to someone else, called here “thy neighbor.” The Jewish society of James’ day viewed a neighbor only as a fellow Jew. But James is guiding his listeners into understanding that their view of what made someone a neighbor had to be expanded. Anyone bearing the name of Christ belonged to His kingdom and was to be included as a neighbor. On the other hand, the person who fails to follow the royal law is a “transgressor” (Gk. *parabates*, par-ab-AT-ace) or breaker of the law. James points out that showing favoritism stands in direct opposition to obedience to the royal law. When God’s people are guilty of having the respect of persons, they are committing a sin against God.

10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. 11 For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

James drives home the point that the smallest transgression of God’s law makes one guilty of violating the whole law. A chain with a single broken link is a broken chain. James is trying to help his listeners understand that they were not to pick and choose when it comes to obeying God’s commands. By choosing the imagery of someone who would not commit adultery but would kill, James might have had in mind the zealots who were so pious that they would never commit adultery but who also had no problem with assassinating those they deemed worthy of death. God is not honored when we follow some of His commands and not others because we find some more acceptable than others. Since it is the same God who has declared what constitutes sin, one cannot differentiate on the basis of individual sin. Even though a person commits one type of sin but refrains from committing another form of sin, in essence, that person is rejecting the whole of God’s authority and is, therefore, guilty of committing sin. All people are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). When partiality and distinctions are shown based on race, gender, position, power, or wealth, sin has entered in and God’s law has been violated.

12 So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

Finally, James cautions his listeners to speak and act as those who would be judged by the law of liberty, which was the standard that was set by the Lord Jesus Christ (see 1:25). James is again reminding believers that because they accepted Christ as Lord, the Spirit of Christ was at work transforming their nature into something that was pleasing and acceptable to God. This transformation should show itself in their speech and actions. Jewish teachers often defined God’s character by two attributes: mercy and justice. Mercy (Gk. *eleos*, EL-eh-os) meant to show kindness or goodwill toward others, while justice (Gk. *krisis*, KREE-sis) meant condemnation. Both belong to the providence of God. James states the truth that God’s mercy will be shown to those who themselves show mercy, and God’s condemnation will fall on anyone who does not show mercy. Believers who show kindness and goodwill toward others, then, need never fear being on the receiving end of God’s judgment

because Jesus has declared that the merciful will receive God's mercy (Matthew 5:7). James counsels his readers to talk and act as though they truly believe what they claim to believe. They must live up to the faith that they profess with their mouths and refrain from betraying God's law of love by showing preferential treatment. It is clear from his teaching that part of living by God's standards involves helping those who are in need. If we show no mercy to others, then we cannot expect mercy from God in return. James warns that believers will be judged with the same type of judgment they show to others. If we take heed to James's instructions and follow Jesus' words, we will avoid the trap of deceiving ourselves. In other words, we will fulfill the commandment of God by becoming doers of the Word ,by showing love and mercy to our brothers and sisters.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Extending Mercy | More Important than Sacrifice
(Matthew 12:1-8)

TUESDAY

Love One Another from the Heart
(1 Peter 1:17-23)

WEDNESDAY

In Christ Gentiles Share Abraham's Faith
(Galatians 3:6-9, 13-14)

THURSDAY

Faith of Levite Mother Saves Moses
(Exodus 2:1-10)

FRIDAY

Unexpressed Faith Has No Value
(James 2:14-17)

SATURDAY

Faith and Works Complement Each Other
(James 2:18-26)

SUNDAY

Disdain the Practice of Partiality
(James 2:1-13)