

Part Four: The Prohibition of Prejudice

Written by Bob Stone

James 2:1-13

- How important is it that we treat new people in our services with respect, honor, love and mercy?
- How important is it that we look beyond their outward appearance?
- What would happen if everyone who came felt love and were shown mercy, not judgment?
- How does my greeting others affect my own standing with God?

These are just some of the questions James 2:1-13 will answer. Be prepared to change how you act each Sunday. This lesson could cause our attendance and our ministry to the needy to explode in terms of numbers and impact.

The Prohibition of Favoritism/Prejudice

vv. 1-3—*"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. 2] Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 3] If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' 4] have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"*

The directive for all believers is, "No favoritism." It's a universal principle applying to all situations. **Favoritism** is a compound word originating from two words: "to receive" and "face, or countenance." Literally, to "receive by face" is to evaluate people on the basis of surface characteristics, to focus on the outward appearance and not inner qualities or the value of the person.

The Demonstration of Favoritism—v. 1-4.

In the Old Testament we see an example of favoritism in 1 Samuel 16, where Samuel is charged with anointing Israel's new king and goes to Jesse's household.

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When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen this one." 10 Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these." 11 So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered, "but he is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." 12 So he sent and had him brought in. He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; he is the one." 13 So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power.

James gives a hypothetical illustration of favoritism here in chapter 2, v. 2—"Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in."

The reference to a "gold ring" literally refers to someone gold-fingered, suggesting a man with numerous rings and social significance walks through the doors. A poor man with shabby clothes (in contrast to the rich man's fine clothes) also comes into the church meeting. Those present have a choice of how they will respond to the guests/newcomers.

Special attention might be given to the rich: directed to a good seat (as the Pharisees expect in Matt. 23:6). This might have been the best seat in the synagogue (where Christians met before they were thrown out). It might have been in a house. (Most church meetings were.) It might have been a special meeting place.

Unfortunately, poor treatment could well be given to the poor. It might be standing room

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only, maybe seating on the floor (with no comfort or dignity).

The Problem of Favoritism is Defined

The definition of favoritism is expanded as we read further in chapter 2.

Favoritism violates belief in Jesus. v. 1—*"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism."* The two don't go together. Our Lord judges the heart. In fact, His evaluation flies in the face of everything the world is looking for. We find out in 1 Cor. 1:26-31 what Jesus is like.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

What does that say to us?

- We must accept others as He does
- We must evaluate others as He does
- We must act towards others as He does
- We must value others as He does

Favoritism is also preferential treatment. v. 3a—*"If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,'"*

Favoritism is demeaning to another. v. 3b—*"but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,'"* What does that

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say to the poor man?

Favoritism is discrimination. v. 4a—*"have you not discriminated among yourselves"* It can mean making distinctions, but more commonly it means to be divided, i.e., to have divided loyalty—James 1:6. James Adamson writes that it "indicates they're facing both ways... nominally to Christ, and actually to worldly snobbery."

Favoritism is judging with evil thoughts. v. 4b—*"and become judges with evil thoughts?"* What is the basis for judgment?

- outward appearances—e.g., looks, clothes
- worldly values

What are the evil thoughts? Here are some possibilities:

- Rich people seem more valuable/better
- Rich people are good for the church
- Rich people deserve the best
- Rich people make the church look good

The Definition Applied

1. What's wrong with these judgments? They are evil.
2. What's wrong with any judgment based on appearances or "stuff?" Most often, it is inaccurate.
3. Who are the rich among us? We are the rich.
4. What do the rich often act like? The following verses will tell us.

The Potential of the Poor Defined Further

v. 5—*"Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"* This is very revealing, for it tells us what God sees. The poor look different in God's eyes than in the world's eyes—v. 5a. What does he see?

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The poor are chosen to be rich in faith (v. 5). To discriminate against the poor, needy or infirmed is to ignore God's grace. To discriminate is to ignore God's choice. The rule is 1 Cor. 1:26-31 ([see above](#))—*He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things.*

The exceptions include Barnabas, Lydia, Philemon, Joseph of Arimathea—Mark 15:43-47, Caesar's household, Erastus (1 Cor. 1:26—*"not many were influential; not many were of noble birth."*)

Not every rich person is doomed, nor is every poor person saved. To discriminate, however, is to ignore or devalue what God has chosen. How does that apply to us?

- If He embraces and lifts up others, how can I reject them?
- How can I exclude anyone from my home, table, friendship, love, or church when God has chosen them for Himself?
- Who has He chosen?

James did not spiritualize or idealize poverty, which does not guarantee either faith or final salvation. But James was pointing out something that is a challenge when ministering to the rich. The rich have a tendency to believe they have all they need, or know how to get what they need on this earth, so they wonder why they need Jesus.

The poor, in general, are much more likely to believe in a heaven—something better to come, in order to compensate for the present needs in this life. That's not always true, obviously, but in general it is more difficult for a rich man to come to faith than a poor man (see Matt. 19:16-29).

God never asks us/me who to include in the Body! He chooses the poor to inherit the kingdom. v. 5b—*"Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"*

He invests great worth in them and makes them rich in faith (in the realm of faith). He gives faith, however, only to those who love Him. "...the kingdom he promised those who love him?"

What does it mean to be rich in faith? What do I value most—to be rich in wealth, or to be rich in faith?

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With all that potential, however, the poor are often insulted by believers. v. 6—*"But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?"*
To insult means to actively treat with disdain.

The Pattern of the Rich Described

vv. 6-7—*"But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7] Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?"*

The rich exploited these Christians and dragged them into court. They controlled the courts in James' day, and the poor received no justice. The rich also slandered others, including Jesus, bringing Him into dishonor by their speech and their actions. They took, but didn't often contribute. In society, the rich spent what they got; they weren't frugal or giving. They may, in fact, have preyed upon the weak

Things haven't changed much; the rich still act this way in many cases. Even in the church, only 20 percent of the rich give 80 percent. Eighty percent of the rich give only 20 percent of the need.

The obvious question is, why give honor or preference to those who might be hostile to Christianity? Why give attention to those who think they don't need Christ?

In case these Jewish Christians still didn't get it, James met them on their own ground. They had no New Testament as we know it, yet he appealed to them concerning their obedience to the law and to adopt the Christian attitude—the attitude of Christ.

The Prospects for Believers Who Discriminate

v. 8—*"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."*

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Here are the options:

To keep the royal law found in Scripture.

Not all James' readers were showing favoritism. Many had discovered and were living the teachings of Jesus, who summed up the law toward others as: *"Love your neighbor (love your wife) as yourself"* (Matt. 22:34-40; John 15:12).

We are to love as we have been loved—John 15:12. We don't need a list of negatives/commands to live by, if we love others as ourselves. The royal law is positive, not negative—loving, not legalistic. It is relational and loving, not prejudicial or based on adherence to rules. If these Jewish Christians didn't follow the royal law, however, they would choose the alternative.

Sin—and be convicted as lawbreakers.

Sin is not loving our neighbor (our wife) as ourself. Why is that being a lawbreaker in this context? The principle is that if we stumble at one point, we are guilty of breaking all of it. This is for Jews who might obey one law and disobey or overlook another. Likewise, this is for a Christian who might obey most of the rules, but overlook love. Love sums up the whole law—Matt. 22:34-40.

In case they didn't get it, he used an illustration in v. 11—*"For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery, also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker."*

If we don't commit adultery/sexual sin, but we kill someone, we are still lawbreakers and obviously not loving our neighbor as ourself. If we don't commit adultery or murder, but show favoritism, we are not loving others as ourselves.

The Principle Applied to Believers

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vv. 12-13—*"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, 13] because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"*

The Command: to speak and act the royal law—v. 12.

We are called both to speak (proclaim it) and act (obey it). James 1:22 and 25 say, *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 25] But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does."*

What law was he referring to? v. 8—"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."

What will this law do for us and others?

- **Free from sin.** vv. 9,11—*"But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 11] For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker."*

- **Free others from discrimination, insults, favoritism.** Why?

The Reason. v. 13

"...because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"

Judgment without mercy will be shown to those who aren't merciful. If we show favoritism, we are denying mercy and will be judged without mercy. If we are merciful and loving to others, recognizing our poverty and sin, we will be shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment, discrimination, and favoritism. It doesn't violate justice, because justice

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must be done, but God extends grace and mercy more than justice to the poor, the oppressed, to us. If we understand how unlovable and unattractive we are, how much we need the mercy of God, then we will offer His mercy to others. If we can't do that, then we don't understand the mercy of God in our lives and our own forgiveness.

What did this message reveal about you? Do you judge and discriminate, looking at outward appearances?

- How people look
- How much they have
- What status they have
- How many rules or commands they obey
- Are you judging others in your family a lot?
- Do you only love and greet people like yourself?

Or do you show mercy?

- Do you open your heart to others if they are different?
- Are you a channel of love, valuing what God does in people?
- Do you look out for others, welcoming them to our meeting and giving them the best seat and loving attention?
- What would happen to Hillcrest if everyone coming to this meeting felt loved, accepted and was shown great mercy?
- How big a meeting room would it take to house people who were loved and accepted that way?