

## The Problem with Partiality James 2:1-13

### **Slide 1**

Chances are that most of us today would describe ourselves as being impartial and fair, but are we really as fair as we like to think? Are we really fair-minded? Do we actually not discriminate?

Suppose a poorly dressed man reeking of cheap wine and a strong case of body odor decided to worship with us.

Would we welcome him as readily as we might welcome a modestly dressed, clean-cut person who looks and smells like us?

Better yet, what if Bill Gates were to arrive for the Sunday morning service? Would we treat him with the same level of courtesy with which we treat everyone else?

The truth of the matter is that we're not as impartial as we'd like to believe. We have preferences, comfort zones for interacting with others.

We're less likely to connect with those from outside our own circles than we are to connect with those like us. But is that the way God intends for us to be? Better yet, is there anything we can do about it?

James addresses the problem with partiality early in his epistle. He obviously saw partiality in the fellowship as a major hindrance to Christian maturity.

When we examine today's passage, these instructions regarding partiality follow the instructions on pure religion at the end of chapter one.

In other words, in addition to visiting widows and the fatherless and keeping oneself unspotted from the world, a believer must also resist any form of partiality.

As important as these instructions on partiality were to the first-century believers, they're especially important to twenty-first century believers as well.

If our fellowship is to experience true spiritual growth and maturity, we must apply ourselves to the removal of every hint of partiality.

Today, we're going to examine five lessons James teaches to better understand the problem of partiality.

## **Slide 2**

The first lesson James wants us to learn is that the principle of partiality goes against the character of our faith. This is why James begins chapter two with a distinct admonitions to believers.

James 2:1, *"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism."*

Let me paraphrase this, *"Brothers, being partial to different people doesn't fit with a proper faith in Jesus."* James indicates that partiality is unworthy in the life of a believer.

Note, this verse begins with the greeting, *"My brothers and sisters."* Of the 104 verses in the book of James, 54 are commands. This command, though, is softened with these words.

James wants to make sure that his audience is keenly focused on the words to come by reminding them that they are not strangers or part of a faceless crowd.

James wants the reader to know they are a spiritual relative of the writer.

James wants believers to understand that Jesus Christ, the living glory of God, is not honored by followers who pick and choose in their relationships here on the earth.

Everyone is a candidate for the Gospel, and every believer is a brother or sister in Christ.

Have you ever taken an achievement test in school to evaluate your performance? If so, the percentile rating you received represented where you fell in relation to all the other people taking the test.

For example, a rating at the ninety-fifth percentile meant that you did better than ninety-five percent of the people who took the test. It also meant that five percent of the people who took the test did better than you.

Showing partiality for Christians is like being happy being at the fiftieth percentile, representing a willingness to settle for mediocrity in faith.

James says that kind of attitude doesn't mesh with the kind of Savior we have in Jesus. He continues in verses 2-4 by showing the kind of partiality to which he's speaking.

### **Slide 3**

*James 2:2-4, "Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 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," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"*

James contrasts the arrival of a rich man and a poor man in the assembly or synagogue of the believers. By those believers' own words and actions, they were guilty of the sin of double-mindedness.

The rich man wore a gold ring, apparently a sign of wealth at the time. The "*fine clothes*" indicates that his robes were fashionable and clean, standing in stark contrast to the "*filthy old clothes*" on the poor man.

These two men represent opposite ends of the economic spectrum, but the treatment of the one was just as wrong as the treatment of the other. Why?

Well, the rich man was invited to sit. That may not sound so bad most meeting places of the early church were sparsely furnished, with most believers either crouching on the floor or standing around the walls.

So, that wealthy man, who was offered a seat, was given treatment reserved for the elder members of the congregation.

The poor man, on the other hand, was directed to sit "*on the floor by my feet.*" In other words, the cheap seats.

The attitude toward these two men represented two different extremes in welcoming newcomers to the fellowship.

This is when James takes the opportunity to strike at the real point in verse four, where I paraphrase, "*Wouldn't you agree this kind of partiality betrays your attempts at sincere faith?*"

It's impossible for us to build a real, vital faith if we put more stock in people than we do in God.

By giving this example, we're to think of how we've treated people at times simply to gain their favor or discourage them from invading our comfort zones.

This kind of behavior doesn't fit with a life of faith in Christ.

#### **Slide 4**

James next delves skillfully into the truth about the rich and the poor and how they generally relate to believers.

*James 2:5-7, "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?"*

The word "*Listen*" at the beginning of verse five marks the transition to a hardline teaching segment. He's saying, "*Pay attention!*"

James is getting ready to ask some important, pointed questions. Things we'd do well to consider thoughtfully and carefully.

Then, in the form of a series of rhetorical questions, James shows the tendencies of both groups.

By doing this, the result is a sermon in itself. It challenges the audience to stop and think about motives and how they treat those with whom they come in contact.

By adding the phrase, "*my dear brothers and sisters,*" he is focusing on believers, but not just any believer.

These words are for those who're at one with the author; those who consider themselves to be on the same page as James.

It's generally true that those who're poor are more likely to be rich in faith since they have less to distract them from their faith. Now, that doesn't mean that the wealthy are incapable of faith.

Using James' logic here, since we're the wealthiest nation on the earth, it stands to reason that the faith of believers in the Third World is far greater than our own.

Now this statement is a general principle, not a law. It's possible for the wealthy to have a remarkable faith, but it's not generally as likely.

Remember the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-25 who asked Jesus what good thing he must do to have eternal life.

Jesus told him, *"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."*

But when the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. The fewer the distractions, the greater the faith.

James also said that those who're wealthy are more likely to create problems for believers because those who were rich were the ones oppressing believers and carrying them to court.

It's true even today, the wealthy are used to having things their way. Many believe that the church ought to operate according to their desires. James warned his readers about this in no uncertain terms.

Chuck Colson, in his book, *Loving God*, tells the story of Mickey Cohen, a famous gangster who supposedly made a profession of faith in Christ. His "conversion" was highly publicized in the papers and other new media.

Cohen's problem, though, was that his lifestyle actually changed little. He continued to be involved with his mafia connections and many of his underworld activities.

When confronted with his need for change in his lifestyle, Cohen replied, "*Couldn't God use a Christian gangster?*" He expected Christianity to adapt to his lifestyle, rather than adapt his lifestyle to Christianity.

It was also the wealthy of James' day who were the most anti-Christian. The Romans considered Christianity to be a wild, cannibalistic sect of Judaism.

They misconstrued the teachings regarding the Lord's Supper, where Jesus told his disciples they were eating his body and drinking his blood, as implications of human sacrifice and cannibalism.

It was popular to ridicule and abuse believers, especially among the wealthy. The church didn't gain any real degree of respect until the conversion of Constantine in 316AD.

Until that time, the name "Christian" was synonymous with outcast, psychopath, and anything else detestable.

In asking these questions, James challenged his reader to consider the priorities of faith in Christ. Are we to be driven by our need to pay the bills or our desire to build God's kingdom?

I've found by experience that most poor people give a larger percentage of their income than their wealthy counterparts. Go figure. It makes sense to say that James knew what he was talking about.

## Slide 5

James then addressed the conflict between Law and grace which has been a difficult subject for believers since the first Gentile trusted Christ.

It has divided congregations, birthed denominations, and even led to the Protestant Reformation.

*James 2:8-11, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker."*

James shows his balanced approach to the Law when he reveals that the Law was imperfect in that, while it caused man to realize his sin, it offered no lasting way out of sin.

The concept of two types of laws, the "royal law" and the "law of liberty," drives this passage.

James teaches that the "royal law", as noble as it seems, is not enough to motivate the kind of impartiality needed by believers.

The "law of liberty," however, encompasses the first and provides the impetus needed to carry out the task.

The royal law, according to James, is *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* Jesus cites this as the second greatest commandment, immediately after *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength."*



James says that showing partiality is a violation of the royal law. I read an illustration that compares practicing partiality to throwing a rock at a plate glass window.

Even though the rock will only contact the window at one point, the entire window will shatter because of the structural failure that the impact of the rock produces.

It's the same way with the Law and violating one point. As an older preacher used to say, "*Sin is sin is sin.*" The fact of the sin far outweighs any degree or seriousness.

That's why a prostitute or convicted criminal can experience the same kind of grace that a young girl or boy who has grown up in the church experiences.

In essence, the sin of partiality is not an issue of "how" as much as it is a question of "why."

The alternative to partiality builds the perseverance of our faith. Judgment is forthcoming for all humankind. 2 Corinthians 5:10 tells us, "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ...*"

How we stand at that judgment depends largely on the decisions we make here. James indicates this as he discusses the standard for our judgment and the needed attribute for our vindication.

### **Slide 6**

Verse twelve is perhaps the most encouraging of the entire passage for today.

James 2:12, "*Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.*"

It's interesting to note that this same phrase, "*the law that gives freedom*" also appears in James 1:25, "... *the perfect law that gives freedom.*" James is talking about the Good News of the Gospel.

Verse twelve is telling us to live in a way that's in accordance with the Good News of the Gospel, since we'll be judged according to it.

Think about it. What have our efforts been to extend the Gospel? Has our conduct, our words, our actions, our attitudes pointed people to Christ?

This is the standard for the judgment of believers: What kind of kingdom building have we been up to while on earth? Finally, James points to the need of every believer: Mercy.

James 2:13, "*Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*"

Paraphrased, this verse says, "*No mercy will be shown to the one who has never shown mercy, and mercy is the release valve for the pain of judgment.*"

It's essential that Christians be about the business of showing mercy. There's a distinct difference between partiality and showing mercy. Remember that mercy is not giving a person what he or she deserves.

The bottom line is that James says that God's mercy in judgment is connected to our practice of mercy here.

God is going to take into consideration our involvement in showing mercy when it comes to His opportunity to extend mercy to us at the judgment.

How, then, will we find ourselves when that time comes? Will we be the recipients of mercy in judgment if we never make a practice of showing mercy here? This should make us stop and think.

## **Slide 7**

### Conclusion

As we've looked at these five lessons on impartiality today, the question is *"Where does the rubber meet the road?"*

If we look into God's Word and fail to do anything about it, we're doing God and ourselves a great disservice. So, what do we do?

We need to follow James' instructions. We need to understand that anyone can practice partiality, but it takes a real commitment in living our faith to rise above this and actually follow Jesus' example.

We must show equally warm hospitality to everyone who visits and/or joins our fellowship, regardless of their background. Remember that, while anyone can have faith, it is the poor who generally live it to the fullest.

Then we must balance the royal law with the law of liberty. It's easier to love our neighbor when we're doing it because we love Jesus!

Finally, we must show mercy instead of partiality. If we're going to be kind to a person, do it according to what God has done for us, not according to what we want the person to do for us.

As James said, *"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."*