

How to Live a Good/Godly Life:
No Favorites!
Leviticus 19:15-18; James 2:1-13

Rev. Lynell M. Caudillo
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Leviticus 19:15-18

¹⁵“Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. ¹⁶“Do not go about spreading slander among your people. “Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the LORD. ¹⁷“Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. ¹⁸“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

James 2:1-13 NIV

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³If 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,” ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, 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? ⁶But 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? ⁷Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” ^[a]you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” ^[b] also said, “You shall not murder.” ^[c] If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. ¹²Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Introduction:

It is important to understand some realities about Roman culture at the time James wrote this letter. The ancient society in which the author lived, was quite unlike ours. Roughly 95 % of all people were poor. Class or status within ancient Roman society was determined by a complex variety of factors, including but not limited to: age, status at birth, gender, citizenship, military career and or occupation.

That said, it was difficult if not impossible to improve one's place. One's standing in society was also influenced by where one lived (urban vs. rural), whether one was part of the "landed gentry" or not, for ownership of land represented one kind of wealth, but money represented a more elite form of wealth. Patronage and the support of benefactors as well as whether or not one owned slaves, or whether or not one was a slave or a freedman—all of these factors came into play when it came to being located on a particular "rung of the social ladder". All of this was present in the culture.

THEN, add to this mix, Christianity, which teaches that ALL persons—regardless of age/race/sex/educational background/wealth or lack thereof—all persons are made in the image of God, and Christ died and rose again to redeem us all?! *It was a situation ripe for conflict.*

READ James 2:1-13. PRAY.

James brings three charges against his readers:

First, they are guilty of social snobbery and partiality, both of which are diametrically opposed to godly, Christ-like character.

Second, showing favoritism is strangely and ironically short sighted. For the recipients of James' letter, by showing preferential behavior toward the rich (v5), they are taking the side of those who are their oppressors in their day (v.6-7).

Finally, James calls this misguided behavior, sin. Sin involves breaking the law of love, found in Leviticus 19:18 (and elsewhere) "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Ultimately he calls for mercy, not judgement. (v. 13).

Our culture/society is quite different from the one in which James found himself. And yet nearly 2,000 years later, is it any surprise that we are dealing with the

very same issues today?! Why is that, do you suppose? I think this is due to our human propensity to sin. We are not as good at loving one another as we think we are, OR as we'd like to be. Honestly, we are quick to judge others, often on a very superficial basis!

I'm confident of two things: that each of us has been on the receiving end of discriminatory behavior, and each of us has also engaged in this behavior toward others.

The following are real events that happened in real churches in different locations at different times:

*I had invited him to have breakfast with me--a homeless man who, with session permission, was sleeping in the breezeway of a church in White Center. If I'd met him on the street, I would never have guessed he was homeless. "Latimore" was clean cut, well-mannered, intelligent and resourceful. He did not fit the stereotype! (Oops! Maybe that last word is a clue?! Stereotype???)

*A woman with an unkept appearance began to attend worship; so shy she'd arrive late and leave early. Once she became more comfortable, she developed friends, attended a bible study. During a "Raise the Roof" financial campaign to replace the leaky roof, she dropped by the office during the week. Privately she handed me an envelope, asked for her gift to remain anonymous, and left so quickly I had no opportunity to even thank her...for the cashier's check for \$40,000!

*In the Union Gospel Mission Summer Academy held at a Presbyterian church, I was in charge of the morning academic activities. The site supervisor was a college student named "Andre". He texted me early one morning: "I'll be late, will explain later." I got the program started as usual, and later in the morning he drew me aside and explained.

He'd been stopped and detained by the Kent police. No traffic infraction, no broken tail light on his parent's black SUV that was properly insured. Everything was in order. His only "crime"? Being a young African American male. This is called racial profiling. It is wrong. It happened to my friend Andre, not once but twice that summer.

At one point in our ministry careers, my husband and I were invited to interview for a pastoral position. We had sent our resume's ahead but had not seen the job description. We arrived early and after perusing it, we came to the conclusion that we were a very poor "match" in experience and skills, for what the position required. We went through with the interview (did not get a job offer) but quickly concluded that by interviewing us, the committee could say they had followed the "equal opportunity" guidelines—interviewing a woman and a minority (Rob is Hispanic) at the same time!

* I cringe to recall an occasion when a church elder escorted a visiting high school student into the youth room on a Sunday morning. Mr. F. introduced the student to the adult leader and several of the youth. As the elder departed, he could be overheard saying quietly to the adult leader: "Treat him right, be sure he comes back. His dad is a business owner, he could support this church with big bucks!"

This example is not far from the one James illustrates from his own church experience.

Let's visit "The Church of the Immaculate Perception"*; it's got the truth but it's also got trouble. The usher has vision problems: he's suffering from a severe case of myopia or spiritual near-sightedness! Two people arrive at church late, but for different reasons. The first is late because he wants to make a grand entrance. He wants to be noticed. The other cares little about what others think of him, he's there to worship.

The wealthy one arrives first. His well-polished jewelry and fine clothes dazzle the nearsighted usher who shows this guy to the best seat in the house. The poorer worshipper shows up next. Based on his appearance, the usher cannot be bothered to find him a seat, but lets him stand in the back or sit on the floor. (*The Problem of Discrimination, by Howard Hendricks)

James could not be clearer: showing favoritism on any basis is a breach of the law of Love. All of us are guilty of pre-judging others, on the basis of the material, not the spiritual; on the basis of the temporal vs. the eternal realities, and on the basis of external and superficial, vs. internal, deeper truth. Scripture tells us that "... The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) And, "... God does not show favoritism." (Romans 2:11)

We are guilty, as charged. James says simply “don’t keep on doing this”. (That is the emphasis of the verb in Greek.)

We have pre-judged others in this way.

There are occasions when we may feel that we have been on the receiving end of discrimination. We feel unfairly judged by others, and often on the basis of something superficial. We need to remember what that feels like, to be on the receiving end. May we not be those who judge others in this same way.

Tomorrow is the birthday of MLK, Jr. who said we should judge others “...not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character...”.

Not by the letters after a person’s name.

Not by the make/model vehicle a person drives, the clothes they wear, the job they hold (or don’t hold), the neighborhood in which they live, their age, sex, tattoos, piercing or lack thereof!

In the example James gives the church shows favoritism to those who are wealthy. They, like we, are immersed in a culture and society that has multiple ways of labeling or classifying people as “more than” or “less than”.

We cannot escape these influences, but **first we must be aware** of them. Once aware, we **must take action** as individuals, and perhaps even as a group, to combat these as not only unfair, but unbiblical. Showing favoritism or partiality (prejudice/discrimination) is to break the law of love.

James is very clear and easy enough to understand. **It is difficult, but NOT impossible to learn and behave in counter-cultural, Christ-like ways!**

The biblical understanding of “Love” is not that it is a warm fuzzy feeling, or a romantic inclination. Love is making my needs secondary to the needs of the beloved. Love is self-sacrificing. Far more than words, love is expressed in concrete action.

There’s the rub.

Because when it comes to pre-judging others, in all likelihood, we do not **know** them. ***We form opinions and attitudes toward others based on assumptions, not facts, because we do not know them.*** And more often than not, we fear what or who we do not know. Faith is not about fear. Faith is about knowing and being known...first by God, and then by others!

We are called to love our “neighbor”. When asked the question: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds by telling the story known to us as “the Good Samaritan”. In the minds of those who first heard it, there was NOTHING good about a Samaritan! These people were the sworn enemies of the Jews, low life, scum!

How audacious of Jesus to say that we are to love, even our enemies! Why?

Because all lives matter to God. No exceptions.

Because all lives – **all people are made in God’s image.** No exceptions.

Because all lives – **are ones for whom Christ died and rose again.** No exceptions.

Because God loves each and every one of us sinners. No exceptions.

May God correct our short-sightedness. May God correct our myopic view of the world in order that we may see every person as God sees him/her. May God break down barriers to knowing those who we perceive incorrectly as “less than” and love them as God loves them.

Because all lives matter. No exceptions.

Let us pray:

God of grace:

We ourselves desire mercy, not judgement. But we confess that we have wrongly judged others. Forgive us for not looking into the hearts of others but letting the world push us into its mold of superficiality. We long to be loved and valued. May we love and value others, give us eyes to see, and hearts to love others, as you have loved us. Amen!