

# Treat Each Other Equally

James 2:1-13

## Intro

Have you ever have been the object of partiality. Perhaps your mother or father favoured your brother or sister more than you. Perhaps your teacher or your employer showed favoritism to another person. Because of their special relationship with a superior, they got promotions when you were just as qualified.

Have you ever been the object of discrimination? Perhaps it was for how you looked, your height, your weight, your looks. Perhaps you've experienced discrimination on the basis of your intelligence, your race, your religion, your gender. How did it make you feel? Perhaps you may be bearing the scars of those past experiences to this very day. This is the central issue that James tackles in this passage – that of showing favoritism.

You'd think that the church would be a place where we are all equal as children of God. Unfortunately, it wasn't so in New Testament days and it isn't so in our own time. James calls on us to recognize the problem and to deal with it in a God honouring way.

James as leader of the Jerusalem church had probably seen it in the gatherings of the Mother Church in Jerusalem. A rich person enters and all the leaders are falling over themselves to honour him with attention, with flattery, and with the best seat in the house. Perhaps he'll become a regular part of the church and will give big offerings? Sound familiar?

Then a poor man enters on a day when all the seats are filled. His clothing needs mending and he hasn't taken a bath for a while. "*Stand there,*" we tell him. There are some seats on the floor at the front, that's all we can offer, we tell him, hoping that he'll find somewhere else to go to church. His presence is an embarrassment. Too many poor people and we'll be thought of as a poor-person's church. It will reflect on us. And they'll expect us to give them things. Sound familiar?

## James 2

In these opening verses of chapter 2 James paints a picture and then he tells us what's wrong with this picture. The believers have an assembly, and a rich person comes to the assembly with "*gold rings, in fine apparel.*" The other person who comes in is "*a poor man in filthy clothes.*" In this picture, we are told nothing about the character of these men, nothing about their spiritual status or behaviour.

The rich man is shown gracious hospitality, a warm welcome, and is given a good place to sit. The poor man is told, "*You stand there*" or "*sit on the floor by my feet!*" Of course this is degrading and discriminates the poor man. Here James exposes the sin of partiality or favoritism.

James tells us NOT TO DO THIS. We are forbidden as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ to be partial and to discriminate a person on the bases of their social status. When we discriminate against people merely on the basis of their appearance and social status we are doing something that isn't compatible with faith in Christ.

James rebukes these believers when he says, "*Have you not discriminated among yourselves and*

*become judges with evil thoughts?"* (James 2:4). After this indictment, James lists six things wrong with favoritism:

### **Six Things Wrong with Favoritism**

**1/ Favoritism is inconsistent with faith in Christ.** *"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism"* (James 2:1). When you consider what Jesus did, what Jesus taught and how Jesus behaved - there is no justification for favoritism. It is not compatible with faith in Christ. If you show favoritism you are going against what Jesus taught and stands for. It clearly says in Romans 2:11, *For God does not show favoritism.*

**2/ Favoritism makes us judges with evil thoughts.** James says, *"Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"* (James 2:4). What is the source of the evil? In a word it is: selfishness. We treat the rich with attentiveness and honour since they have wealth, and we hope that by our actions some of that honour and wealth might rub off on us. It never hurts to be on the good side of a rich person. Our actions are selfish, and self-serving. As Paul said, *"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs"* (1 Timothy 6:10). Our discrimination is based on our own love of money.

And how about our mistreatment of the poor? It's selfishness again. We don't want to be pulled down to their level, either socially or economically, and we don't want to feel obligated to help the poor. Some churches are guilty of this kind of behaviour.

It may not be the rich that are favoured but perhaps young married couples with growing families who are perceived as the prize. Single moms and the elderly are tolerated, but often not openly welcomed or followed up by calls or visits. We're trying to grow a church, we tell ourselves, and these people form a good social and economic base will help us to be a successful church. But in the meantime we are guilty of prejudging the poor and the elderly and the divorced and the marginalized. We sin because we look to our own needs and not to theirs.

**3/ Favoritism is wrong because God makes no such distinctions.** *"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?"* (James 2:5). God is not a respecter of persons, He does not show favoritism. Peter said to Cornelius, *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism<sup>35</sup> but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."* (Acts 10:34). When we engage in the kind of behaviour James describes in showing favoritism, we are not acting as God's people. Jesus said, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt. 5:4).

**4/ Favoritism dishonours the poor person.** *"But you have dishonored the poor"* (James 2:6). Why should we dishonour someone, simply or merely because of their income, their financial status. The answer is, we shouldn't. 1 Peter 2:17 says we are to honour all men. *"Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God..."* Also we read in Romans 15:7, *"Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory."* We are to respect and accept everyone regardless of their status, race.

**5/ Favoritism makes no sense because the rich were those who oppressed Christians.**

*"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?" (James 2:6b-7). What a strange irony. Some of those who were rich and powerful oppressed Christians in the early centuries of the church. When you look at this brief Letter of James, you can see that James is stirred up about the subject of favoritism shown to the rich. James says, "Aren't the rich the very people who exploit you and try to cheat you in court?"*

The first few verses of James chapter 5 also accuse the rich for hoarding their wealth, cheating the poor, living in luxury and self-indulgence, and walking over the innocent poor in order to exploit them (James 5:1-6). Those of us who live middle class lives in North America are richer than the rich of James' day. What about us? How do we view the poor, the needy and the marginalized?

James' congregation struggled with poverty. Once during a famine, Paul had to raise an offering to help the poor in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8:19-20; Acts 24:17). James is careful to help the poor to value themselves as God values them. *"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?" (James 2:5)*

While the rich seem to have everything in this life, such a view is superficial, says James. Looking with eternal eyes, with our Lord's eyes, we see that the rich will fade away (James 1:11) and find all their hoarded wealth rotted and corroded (James 5:2-3). Instead of honour, the rich who have gained their wealth in an unrighteous way will face a judgment of fire (James 5:3). These are hard words and a very serious matter.

**6/ Favoritism violates the law of love** (James 2:8-13). The royal law of love for God and neighbour is ignored when this kind of prejudice is practiced. *"...if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors."*

*"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbour as yourself," you are doing right." (James 2:8)*

Our King, Jesus, offered us a different perspective, a different law. In Matthew 22:34-40 we read, *"Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'"*

Jesus also said, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35)*

The center of Jesus' ministry was love, love for the poor, love for those rejected by society, love for the sick. He didn't come for himself; he came for them and for us. Prejudice and favoritism are essentially self-serving, self-centered. Our Lord, on the other hand, was essentially self-giving and centered on the needs of others. The Law that governed His life is what his half-brother James calls the Royal Law: *"Love your neighbour as yourself." (James 2:8)*

## **Conclusion**

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

In showing favoritism, we cannot set ourselves up as judges, because at best we are "*judges with evil thoughts*" (James 2:4), and we will be judged ourselves. If we don't show mercy, we will not receive mercy. Jesus said that we will be judged by the same measures of judgment we use to judge others (Matthew 7.2).

Rather, we can show *mercy*. We can let the Royal Law that has liberated us to give another chance to others who have struggled under sin and selfishness. If we judge those people we also judge ourselves. We were there, too. But Christ now, by his mercy, has set us free.

Yes, God is just and will exercise just judgment. We are assured of that throughout the Bible, and especially in the Book of Revelation. But while He is just, He is also loving. He loves to show mercy. In fact, He delights in it. Let's do the same.

Jesus said, "*Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.*" (Matthew 5:7).

Favoritism is a problem we still deal with. Favoritism and partiality are not from God, and Christians are called to love. As humans, we tend to form judgments based on selfish, personal criteria rather than seeing others as God sees them. May we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and follow His example of treating every person with God's mercy and love.