

True Faith is Incompatible with Respect of Persons

The specific example used by James, is that of “respect of persons” – in other words, to be partial or prejudiced in our treatment of others; to show favouritism. Such behaviour is fundamentally incompatible with true faith: because true faith is focused on Jesus Christ, while respect of persons is focused on man. True faith is captivated by the true “Lord of glory,” while favouritism is captivated by the superficial glory of man.

Such respect of persons is then demonstrated by way of a hypothetical scenario (v2-3), in which a rich man and a poor man enter the congregation, and are treated very differently. The rich man is given the best place to sit, while the poor man is told to stand, or sit in a position of dishonour. This superficial judgment, leading to a biased response, reveals an inward partiality; and James describes such people as “judges of evil thoughts,” that is, judges (people who make judgments) characterised by evil thoughts.

Yet we, too, make such biased judgments all the time. Even in churches there is often a distinction between those who are “popular” and those who are “unpopular.” Someone who looks a little different, talks in some unusual way, or generally seems socially awkward, can easily become the target of jokes, pranks, malicious jests, hurtful gossip – even in churches! This sort of casual cruelty to those who are poor, lowly, and unpopular, is all too common and all too easy: but it is utterly incompatible with true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a shame to any Christian individual, or Christian congregation, to be identified with such “respect of persons.” It is a serious matter, and it is little wonder that James chooses this specific example.

“Hearken, my beloved brethren.” James makes an impassioned appeal for the cessation of this behaviour, and gives several reasons to prove its wrongness. In the first place, it reveals a *lack of appreciation for spiritual riches* (v5-6a). While the rich may be outwardly and materially rich, it is the poor who have possession of true riches, because they are “rich in faith” – and by faith, they are inheritors of a kingdom more glorious than any on earth; inhabitants-to-be of a city whose streets are of pure gold. Now James is not saying, of course, that all the “poor of this world” are automatically chosen by God: but generally speaking, it is the poor rather than the rich who are willing to surrender their lives to Christ (cf. Matt. 10:24-25). Those who respect persons, therefore, are in effect despising those whom God has chosen and honouring those whom He has rejected!

In the second place, this respect of persons is *inconsistent with the actual behaviour of the rich* (v6b-7). James asks the question, “Do not rich men oppress you?” These rich men are full of themselves, walking in their elite circles, utterly ignorant of the poor; they will even exploit and make use of the common man, withholding the rightful wages of those who labour on their behalf; they show no restraint in threatening legal action wherever it might be to their benefit, and “draw you before the judgment seats” – and, James says, will you play the sycophant,

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flattering and honouring them in the hopes of gaining some advantage? Why should they feel obliged to requite your flattery? What is more, not only do these rich men oppress and exploit the common folk, thinking themselves superior, they even blaspheme the name of Christ, and place themselves above Him! They live lives of worldliness and carnality, showing no respect whatsoever to the Lord of glory – and again, James says, will you respect and honour them, to the detriment of those whom Jesus loves?

Thirdly, and most seriously, to have respect of persons is a *transgression of the law of God* (v8-9). Note how God's law is described. It is the "royal law," and that speaks of its authority and majesty: it is the law of the King, the highest of all laws, and should overrule all our carnal thinking. It is "according to the scripture," and that speaks of its established, unchanging nature; and also of its accessibility. The royal law is simply this: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," and this is a law that clearly precludes favouritism. To have respect of persons is to fail to treat others as God requires, and is therefore to transgress God's law governing our relations with one another.

In the final part of this section, James emphasises the seriousness of this transgression by pointing to two considerations: the unity of the law (v10-11), and the judgment to come (v12-13). In anticipation of those who might say, "I'm nice to most people, surely a little favouritism here and there isn't so bad," James points out that the law must be taken as a united whole. One cannot pick which parts to obey, which parts to bend, and which to break. This is because the law was given by one Lawgiver – and once the law is known, to break even one small point of the law reveals one's attitude towards the Lawgiver Himself. James is not saying that all sins are equal, but that all parts of the law are important, and none can be ignored; he uses the examples of murder and adultery, serious sins, to make the point clear: no one would dare to plead himself innocent of transgression, if he had committed murder but not adultery!

As believers, then, we are under the "law of liberty." The law has taken on a new meaning. Whereas before salvation the law was set to slay us, now after salvation the law no longer kills but guides; it is no longer a terror, now we are able to obey it; it is the law that maintains us in the state of liberty and freedom from sin and bondage. It is by the mercy of God that we have been "made... free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2), brought under this gracious law of liberty, and set free to live the way God wants us to live – therefore, James tells us, we ought to act (to "speak" and "do") accordingly!