

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

PARTIALITY AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE FAMILY OF GOD!

Read James 2:1-13

Introduction

Think back. You have been the object of partiality. Perhaps your mother or father liked you more. Or your teacher or your employer. Because of your special relationship with a superior, you got promotions when another was just as qualified. Or perhaps you have never been the favoured one.

You have also been the object of discrimination. Perhaps it was for how you looked -- your height, your weight, your complexion, your hair. Perhaps you've experienced discrimination on the basis of your intelligence, your race, your religion, your gender, your age. Your family's social standing in the community has been a factor -- either negative or positive -- on how you were viewed by the elite. How did it make you feel?

You may be bearing the scars of those encounters to this very day. It is this huge -- and is the central issue that James tackles in these passages.

The Principle of No Partiality:

“My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.” (v1)

The glorious faith we have, the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, should never be associated with partiality (discrimination). The Lord of glory Himself shows no partiality (Deuteronomy 10:17 and Acts 10:34) so neither should those who put their trust in Him.

We will do well to remember that James wrote to a very partial age, filled with prejudice and hatred based on class, ethnicity, nationality, and religious background. In the ancient world people were routinely and permanently categorized because they were Jew or Gentile, slave or free, rich, or poor, Greek or barbarian, or whatever.

A significant aspect of the work of Jesus was to break down these walls that divided humanity, and to bring forth one new race of mankind in Him (Ephesians 2:14-15). The unity and openness of the early church was shocking to the ancient world. But this unity didn't come automatically. As this command from James shows, the apostles had to teach the early church to never hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ... with partiality.

Example of Partiality:

“For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” (vv2-4)

In the ancient Greek, the word assembly is literally synagogue, the name of the meeting place for Jews. The fact that James calls a Christian meeting place a synagogue shows that he wrote before Gentiles were widely received into the church. At the time James wrote, most all Christians came from a Jewish heritage. This is the only place in the New Testament where an assembly of Christians is clearly called a synagogue.

The phrase, the man with gold rings showed that the man was rich. In Roman society the wealthy wore rings on their left hand in great profusion. A sign of wealth, rings were worn with great ostentation. There were even shops in Rome where rings could be rented for special occasions.

"Have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" (v4).

What is the source of the evil? In a word, selfishness.

To favour the rich man over the poor man in the way James described shows a deep carnality among Christians. Their evil thoughts are evident by their partial actions.

- To show partiality shows that we care more for the outward appearance than we do upon the heart. *"For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).* God looks at the heart, and so should we.
- To show partiality shows that we misunderstand who is important and blessed in the sight of God. When we assume that the rich man is more important to God or more blessed by God, we put too much value in material riches.
- To show partiality shows a selfish streak in us. Usually, we favour the rich man over the poor man because we believe we can get more from the rich man. He can do favours for us that the poor man can't.

Poor and Rich in God's Kingdom

"Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonoured the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?" (vv5-7)

Though it is easy for man to be partial to the rich, God isn't partial to them. In fact, since riches can be an obstacle to the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24), there is a sense in which God specially blesses the poor of this world. They are chosen... to be rich in faith because the poor of this world simply have more opportunities to trust God. Therefore, they may be far more rich in faith than the rich man. "The rich man may trust Him; but the poor man must... the poor man has no fortress in which to hide, except the two strong arms of God."

James said God has chosen the "poor". The poor are chosen in the sense that the poor more readily respond to God in faith, having fewer obstacles to the kingdom. God has not only chosen the poor, but we may say that He has chosen the poor first, in the sense Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 1:26: *For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.* Not that God hath chosen all the poor in the world, but his choice is chiefly of them.

We should remind ourselves that God also never calls for partiality against the rich. If one must judge in a dispute between a rich man and a poor man, they should let the law and the facts of the case decide the judgment instead of the economic class of those in the dispute.

Sins of the Rich

"Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?" (vv6b-8)

James reminded his readers that the rich often sin against them (oppress you... drag you). This is often because the love of money is the root of every kind of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). For this reason alone, the rich are not worthy of the partiality often shown to them.

The Royal Law, the King's Law

"If you really fulfil the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," you do well but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors." (vv8-9)

James anticipated that some of his readers might defend their partiality to the rich as simply loving the rich man as their neighbour in obedience to the law. The problem isn't that one is nice to the rich. The problem is that one does show partiality to the rich and is not nice to the poor man! So, you can't excuse your partiality by saying, "I'm just fulfilling the command to love my neighbour as myself."

Our God is a great King, and His law is a royal law. Our King Jesus put special emphasis on this command (Matthew 22:36-40) from the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:18). James is reminding us that the poor man is just as much our neighbour as the rich man is. Partiality and prejudice and favouritism are essentially self-serving, self-centred. Our King, on the other hand, is essentially self-giving and centred on the needs of others. The Law that governed his life is what his brother James calls the Royal Law: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (James 1:8).

Self-Centred Lawbreakers

"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law." (vv10-11)

James here guards us against a selective obedience, the sort that will pick and choose which commands of God should be obeyed and which can be safely disregarded. We can't say, "I like God's command against murder, so I'll keep that one. But I don't like His command against adultery, so I will disregard it." God cares about the whole law.

But while the Royal Law of love states it most clearly, it is not unique. Rather it capsulizes and condenses the spirit of the whole Mosaic Law. For example, we read:

"One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who dwells among you." (Exodus 12:49)

"You shall have the same law for the stranger and for one from your own country; for I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 24:22)

"You shall have one law for him who sins unintentionally, for him who is native-born among the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwells among them." (Numbers 15:29)

The point is that if we are so concerned about keeping laws, we need to heed the clear laws about partiality in the Bible. *"If you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors" (v9).*

Verses 10 and 11 underscore the point. *"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all."* (James 2:10). We cannot be selective in our observance of Jesus' commands. We can't say: I'm such a righteous person, God will overlook this one tiny area." No, we must accept partiality and prejudice as sins, and repent of them. They are evil in God's sight. We cannot hide behind our excuses.

The Law that Liberates

“So, speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” (vv12-13)

At its core, this Law that Liberates is not a written code, but the Spirit of God working in our hearts and writing God's ways and words on our hearts. This way our actions begin to spring from a changed heart rather than from a well-trained set of conditioned responses. In a word, we are liberated.

But more than that, we liberate those whom we used to judge. Where we used to show favouritism to our cronies and discriminate against others, now by this Royal Law of Love we liberate the outcasts of society. We show them love and this energizes in them the potential to be all they can be, too. By our love-actions we liberate both our own selves, and we liberate our society.

We are under the law of liberty. It has liberty, yet it is still a law that must be obeyed and that we will be judged by at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). As those who will be judged by the law of liberty, we should always show mercy to others by refraining from partiality. The mercy we show will be extended to us again on the day of judgment, and that mercy triumphs over judgment.

James is relating another principle of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: *For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you (Matthew 7:2)*. The law of freedom is not laxity but a strict ethical rule of God, and we shall be judged by our adherence to its supreme principle of brotherly love or mercy, i.e., compassion for the sins and sufferings of our fellows.