

FAITH THAT WORKS - PART 4: "SHOW NO PARTIALITY"

James 2:1-13

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Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 4 of our sermon series called "Faith That Works," where we're going through the Book of James together.

And today's sermon is titled: "Show No Partiality."

So let's get right into it.

Sermon Introduction

Appearances can be deceiving.

Not all that glitters is gold.

Clothes do not make the man.

Do not judge the dog by its hairs.

Do not look at the jar but at what is inside it.

Do not judge a book by its cover.

Do not judge at first sight.

He who sees faces does not see hearts.

All these are proverbial sayings from around the world that are all basically saying the same thing: do not judge someone or something simply by outward appearances.

In other words, show no partiality (or favoritism or bias or prejudice or discrimination) based on outward appearances.

You can find proverbs for this in almost every culture. It seems that it is almost universally recognized that it is *wrong* to show partiality based on outward appearances.

But the key question is *why*? Why is it wrong?

Is it merely a *practical* matter? “Well, because sometimes you’re wrong in your judgments, so it’s more practical to suspend your judgments.”

Is it merely a *personal* matter? “Well, you wouldn’t like it if someone misjudged you, so you shouldn’t do it to others.”

Even though those reasons are valid and true, what’s interesting is that, though the Bible *also* exhorts us *not* to show partiality, the *reasons* that God’s Word gives are not merely *practical* or *personal*, but they are *theological* (or *God-centered*) at its core.

So, yes, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ—as Christians—we ought *not* to show partiality, but our *reasons* for doing so are radically different than those of the rest of the world.

In short, Christians ought not to show partiality because it contradicts our God.

The One Thing

Christians ought not to show partiality because it contradicts our God.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to James 2:1-13.

Just want to give a bit of context before jumping into today’s passage.

James, the brother of Jesus, is writing this letter to his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ scattered throughout the Roman empire in the first century.

And so far, in James chapter 1:

- he’s encouraged them to count it all joy when their faith in Jesus is tested under all kinds of trials because they know that God is refining and maturing their faith (1-12);
- he’s warned them not be deceived amidst trials and temptations but to trust that God is always good (13-18); and
- he’s exhorted them to not merely be hearers who quickly forget God’s Word but doers who persistently live out God’s Word (19-27).

And that’s where we are in today’s passage as we begin James chapter 2.

Scripture Reading

Let’s read James 2:1-13 (ESV)

¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

This is God’s Word.

Overview

So why should Christians not show partiality? Because it contradicts our God in three ways:

- I. It contradicts God’s evaluation (vv. 1-7)
- II. It contradicts God’s law (vv. 8-11)
- III. It contradicts God’s mercy (vv. 12-13)

I. It contradicts God’s evaluation (vv. 1-7)

At the end of chapter 1, in verses 26 and 27, James gave three examples of what it looked like to be doers of God’s Word and to express true worship of God—it meant exercising self-control with your speech, caring for the helpless, and being set apart from the world.

And now, look at chapter 2 verse 1.

[¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.]

Here, he gives *another* example of what it looks like to be a doer of God’s Word and to express true worship of God.

Christians—or those who “hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ”—are to show no partiality. We are not “to make judgments about people based on external appearance.”¹

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021). He further writes: “We have rendered the Greek word for NIV favoritism as “receiving the face,” which is a literal rendering of a Hebrew word for partiality or discrimination (prosōpolēmpsia). The word was apparently invented by NT writers to represent the Hebrew word (see also Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; and related words are found in Jas 2:9; Acts 10:34; 1 Pet 1:17).” Daniel M. Doriani (*James*, REC [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007]) also writes: “The word translated ‘favoritism’ is a neologism, a compound word based on an Old Testament phrase. To be hyper-literal, James forbids Christians to ‘receive a face.’ That is, believers should not prefer one person over another because of their appearance—their face, their clothes, or any other aspect of their outward appearance.”

That is James's main thesis or main point of this passage.

To be clear, James is not saying that it's always wrong to honor certain kinds of people. We're still to honor our parents (Eph. 6:2-3); we're to honor our elders—both church elders (1 Tim. 5:17) as well as those who are elderly (1 Tim. 5:1); we're to honor the governing authorities that God has appointed (Rom. 13:1-7); we're to honor orphans and widows as he just mentioned in the previous verse in chapter 1 verse 27 (cf. 1 Tim. 5:3).

The partiality that James has in mind is not about giving honor to those God calls us to honor, but it's about the contrast between who we honor and who we dishonor based on outward appearances.

If you're still not exactly sure what he means by that, James provides an example.

[² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?]

Look at verse 2.

In the example, the setting is the Christian assembly—or the Sunday worship service.

And in the worship service, there are two men that walk in. And James calls attention to their outward appearance.

Notice, he doesn't say "rich man" but that's *assumed* when the "gold ring" on his finger and his "fine clothing" catch the eyes of church members.

But the "poor man" is labeled as such, and in contrast with the rich man, he's wearing "shabby clothing."

Interestingly, in the original language, the contrast of how they're both dressed is even more pronounced. The rich man is literally wearing "shining clothing," and the poor man is literally wearing "filthy clothing."²

We actually don't know anything more about these two men. We don't know if they were believers or unbelievers, members or non-members, morally upright or morally corrupt. The only thing that is brought to our attention is how they were dressed—their outward appearances.

And that's because this example is not really about the rich man or the poor man, but it's about the *members* of the church—and how they *evaluate* them simply by their outward appearances.

Look at verse 3.

The church members "pay attention to"—or more like they "pay *special* attention to the one who wears the fine clothing." Again, James is highlighting the outward appearances.

And what comes out of their mouth is just astonishing. It's one thing to pay special attention in the sense of just observing something intently, like "Wow, that's a nice ring," or "Oh, he's dressed nicely today." But that's

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

obviously not what these members were doing because what comes out of their mouth reveals their hearts—or in verse 4, it reveals their “evil thoughts.”

For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45).

To the rich man, they say, “You sit here in a good place.”

But to the poor man, they say, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet.”

The word for “feet” here is literally “footstool.” In other places in Scripture, God the Father repeatedly says that he will make Christ’s *enemies* his footstool (Luke 20:43; Acts 2:35; Heb. 1:13; 10:13; cf. Ps. 110:1). It’s the same word. And it’s the place for Christ’s *enemies*.

So, in a sense, as the poor man walks into the Christian *assembly*, the church members are treating him, based on nothing else but his outward appearance, as if he is Christ’s *enemy*.

This is more than just being impolite. This is a terrible misrepresentation of God’s *evaluation* of people.

In God’s evaluation, he does not look at outward appearance but at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7), but in this instance, God’s people know nothing of the person’s heart but are only paying attention to outward appearances.

Now, look at verse 4.

When the church members show partiality in this way, they are “ma[king] *distinctions* among [them]selves and becom[ing] judges with evil thoughts.”

Now, in *God’s* evaluation, when it comes to who can be saved, God makes *no* distinction among people (Acts 15:9; Rom. 3:22; Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:28); he shows *no* partiality when it comes to salvation (Acts 10:34).

It doesn’t matter if someone is rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, educated or uneducated, famous or unknown, an upright citizen or a crucified criminal; the good news of Jesus Christ is that *all* who repent of their sins and believe in him alone as Lord and Savior will be saved.

But by treating this poor man as if he were one of Christ’s enemies at worse or just unwelcome at best, the church members were contradicting God’s evaluation of who can belong to his church. They were making *distinctions* where God does not make distinctions. They were essentially *lying* about what makes a person acceptable in God’s eyes—as if being rich makes a person acceptable to God and being poor makes a person unacceptable to him.

No, what makes a person acceptable to God is that he is washed of his sins through the blood of Jesus Christ—and that is received not by being rich or by being poor, but only by faith in Christ alone.

This kind of partiality is not just rude; it is *evil*. It *lies* about the gospel, and it *lies* about our God.

<pause>

Now, as we’re hearing this example, perhaps you’re thinking to yourself, “Well, I would never say such things to anyone who walks into our Sunday worship service.”

But notice, James is not calling out any *individual* Christian, but he's calling out *all* the members in the church. He uses the plural "yourselves" here in verse 4, but he's also been using the plural "you" throughout in the first three verses.

So even if the whole church isn't saying these things in unison to the rich man and the poor man, they are at least going along with it—and so, they are *all* culpable or guilty in *some* sense of showing partiality, even if those words didn't technically come out of their own mouths.

If the church *knows* of this kind of partiality going on among its members, and we say *nothing* about it *directly* to one another, then it's really no different than *approving* of such partiality.

That's like the Corinthian church who *knew* that they had a member sleeping with his father's wife, and the church did *nothing*. The apostle Paul holds the *whole church* responsible and exhorts them to take action (1 Cor. 5).

So here, James does not give room for us to comfort ourselves with, "Well, at least *I* don't do that." No, if you *know* of such partiality going on in the church, then you are responsible as a *fellow member* to *directly* talk to them about it—like James is doing through this letter, in a spirit of love, even as he continually refers to them as "my *beloved* brothers" (1:16, 19; 2:5).

<pause>

As a church, let's think about this for a moment.

If a stranger were to walk into our Sunday worship service for several weeks, what would his *experience* be? I'm quite confident that nobody in the church would say anything as rude as in James's example, but who would be the ones speaking to him? Would it be just the person at the door greeting them, or just their friend who brought them, or just the ones that we would "expect" would take the initiative to get to know them (whoever they may be in your mind)? Or would it be different people talking and sitting with him each week—people who don't look like him or have any similar background with him but who are genuinely trying to get to know him?

And what would he *see*? Would he see the same people talking to each other after Sunday Celebration week after week? Or would he see such a web of relationships across the church that baffle him in such a way that draws him to the gospel and the Lord who formed such a community? Rich, poor, educated, uneducated, singles, couples, families, people from various ethnicities and personalities and occupations and preferences—such *diverse* people that seem to have nothing in common, making no distinctions among themselves, but treating one another as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.

We would *expect* to see cliques in the *world*—birds of a feather flock together (as they say). But if we see that in the *church*, where rich are with rich, poor are with poor, singles with singles, families with families, Chinese with Chinese, Americans with Americans, refugees with refugees, teachers with teachers, entrepreneurs with entrepreneurs, and so forth—what *difference* is there in the church compared to the rest of the world?

Or as Jesus said in Matthew 5: "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (Matt. 5:46-47).

To be clear, there's nothing wrong to talk and be friends with people who are like you, but that will already happen naturally. But after Sunday Celebration, if you see two people you could talk to, someone you already

know or someone who seems more like you vs. someone you don't really know and wouldn't naturally be inclined to talk to, at least half the time, try to go out of your comfort zone to talk to the latter.

<pause>

Still, we need to realize that it's not just about creating a welcoming environment and talking to people who are different than us, but we should be asking ourselves, "Why is it that I tend to flock towards certain people? And why is it that I tend to avoid certain people?"

I'm sure there could be multiple factors, but here, James highlights how, even as Christians, we are likely more influenced by worldly values than we may realize.

Remember, immediately before this passage, at the end of chapter 1 verse 27, James says that God's people are to keep ourselves "*unstained* from the world."

But here, partiality springs up even in the Christian assembly because God's people are more *stained* by worldly values than we may realize.

The world often values the rich and powerful. The world is attracted to them, wants to be like them, wants to win favor with them. And if we're not careful, the church can slowly start to value those things as well.

But earlier in James chapter 1, he warned that the rich are like a flower of grass that will pass away. He says, "For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flowers fall, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits" (v. 11).

He wants them to see that what the world often values will pass away, and it's foolish to judge as the world judges. Only *God's* evaluation will stand—and so, James continues to help us understand what *God* values.

Look at verse 5.

[⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

At first glance, this seems to conflict with what James just said. God makes *no* distinctions among people when it comes to who can be saved, *but* God has *chosen* those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.

But if we look closely, there's actually no conflict. To be clear, *nobody* is saved just because they are *materially* poor. God saves *both* the rich and the poor, but looking around in the first century and in many parts of the world even today, many of those whom God has chosen to save are considered "poor in the world."

But here and elsewhere in Scripture, there is also a consistent warning to the *rich* in the world. If you are rich, you are in a spiritually precarious or dangerous position (1 Tim. 6:10, 17; Luke 18:25). With riches often come a stronger gravitational pull towards the world and what it values. And so, throughout the Bible, God warns us that "wealth can be more spiritually dangerous than poverty."³

³ Mark Dever, quoted in Kevin DeYoung, "Mark Dever: The Pastor and the Community," TGC, June 11, 2010, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-pastor-and-the-community-mark-dever>.

But “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3; cf. Luke 6:20). Though we are all saved by grace, it is easier for the materially poor to be “poor in spirit” because their worldly circumstances *reinforce* the biblical truths that they are utterly dependent on God for everything and to not set their hopes in worldly riches but in Christ alone and the world to come.

So James is pointing out that, looking around at whom God has saved, it’s clear that God has chosen to honor the poor. Or as 1 Corinthians 1 puts it, God has chosen what is weak, foolish, low, and despised in the world to eliminate all worldly boasting (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

God’s evaluation is very different than the world’s evaluation of people.

But look at verse 6.

Those whom God has *honored*, the church members have *dishonored*. By their partiality (or favoritism) *toward* the rich and *against* the poor, they have *contradicted* God’s evaluation of the poor.

<pause>

And then in the rest of verse 6, James presses in on just how *nonsensical* their partiality really is.

He asks them, “*Who* are the ones *oppressing* you? *Who* are the ones *dragging* you into courts?” It was the *rich*. That doesn’t mean that *every* rich person was doing this, but generally speaking, many of the injustices they were facing and perhaps some of the trials that James was talking about in chapter 1 were being caused by the *rich* (cf. 5:1-6).

And not only that, but look at verse 7.

Generally speaking, the *rich* were the ones who were *blaspheming* Jesus’s name—“the honorable name by which [they] were called.” That may have been through their hardened rejection of Christ (cf. Mark 3:28-30), through their oppression of those who bear Christ’s name (cf. Acts 9:4), or through some combination.

So James is trying to help them see how *nonsensical* it is to be drawn toward *honoring* those who were *dishonoring* Christ’s *people* and Christ’s *name*.

Their partiality *toward* the rich and *against* the poor totally *contradicts* God’s evaluation.

<pause>

So at this point, perhaps you’re convinced that showing partiality is wrong—and maybe you’re even convinced that it contradicts God’s evaluation. But perhaps you’re tempted to think, “Come on, it’s *just* partiality—it’s not like I’m committing adultery or murder, or anything like that. It’s not THAT big of a deal, right?”

James addresses that next.

<pause>

So first, showing partiality contradicts God’s *evaluation*, and second...

II. It contradicts God's law (vv. 8-11)

[⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.]

Look at verse 8.

James quotes from Leviticus 19:18, which says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," and says that "if you really fulfill [this] royal law... [then] you are doing well."

But why does he call it the "royal law"? "Royal" is in reference to "king," so this is the law belonging to the King. And what did King Jesus say about this law?

In Matthew 22, he said that all the Law can be summarized in the two greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:36-40; cf. Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:26-28).

Likewise, Romans 13 says that all the commandments regarding our responsibility to others are summed up in this one command: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom. 13:8-10).

So James is saying, "If you really love your neighbor as yourself, which summarizes how our King has commanded us to regard others, then you are doing well; you are obeying our King's law."

But then, look at verse 9.

James *warns* them against *assuming* that they are really doing this.

It's like the rich man who spoke to Jesus in Matthew 19; he hears the Ten Commandments that are summarized in "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," and he says, "All these things I have kept from my youth" (Matt. 19:18-20; cf. Mark 10:19-20; Luke 18:20-21). And then Jesus lovingly helps him to see that he actually *hasn't* kept those commandments.

That's kind of what James is doing here: "So you think you've kept our King's law to love your neighbor as yourself? Well, partiality is not truly loving *all* your neighbors as yourself. So do you show partiality? Because 'if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.'"

Just look at the language James uses.

Showing partiality is a "sin." Did you catch that? It's not an issue of preference or personality differences, or just clicking with certain people and not clicking with others, but showing partiality is a *sin*.

And it's not a sin of *omission*, but it's an *active* sin that we "commit." We don't *accidentally* show partiality, but it is a *choice* we make and an *action* we carry out.

And so, if we show partiality, then we are "convicted" by the royal law, guilty of *not* loving our neighbor as ourselves, and we are therefore "transgressors" or law-breakers.

What's James's point here? Showing partiality *contradicts* God's law. Indeed, it *breaks* God's law.

But perhaps you're thinking, "Ok, but isn't showing partiality just a *small* part of God's law? I mean, I do a lot of other good in my life. What's the big deal?"

But James keeps digging in.

Look at verse 10.

"For whoever keeps the *whole* law but fails in *one* point has become guilty of *all* of it."

That is, if you break *one* part of the law, you're accountable for *all* of it. It's as if you've broken the *whole* law.

And *why* is that?

Look at verse 11.

"For *he who said*, 'Do not commit adultery,' *also said*, 'Do not murder.'"

All of God's laws come from *God*. And therefore, when we break one of God's laws, it is not just that we have broken *a* law, but we have broken *his* law. In other words, breaking God's law is inherently *personal*.

I know this may be hard for us to grasp because we probably tend to think of laws in terms of *governmental* laws. But governmental laws don't quite work this way. If I break a traffic law, it's not *personal*. In fact, all of a country's laws aren't even from *one* person, but they're laws passed by different people throughout different periods of history.

But that's not how *God's* law works. *He* passes all of them. They all come from *him* as our Creator and King. And so, when we break *one* of God's laws, it's not so much about the *law* that we broke as it's about our total disregard for our relationship with *him*.

Think about a relationship between a parent and young child. When a child disobeys their parents, it's never about how big or small the act seemed to be, but it's about the fact that the child disobeyed his *parents*, and what that reveals about how he *regards* his parents.

I can't remember the first time I disciplined my children, but I'm quite sure it wasn't over something big. Maybe I told one of them not to touch something, I made sure he understood what that meant, and I made sure he understood the consequence if he chose to do it again. And then, he looked at me, smiled, and then deliberately disobeyed me.

I'm sure I'm not alone in experiencing that.

But what does that reveal about a child's heart? What does that reveal about how he regards his parents? It doesn't matter how big or small the act is, but essentially, the blatant disobedience communicates to the parent: "I don't care what you say and what the consequence is, but I'm going to do what I want." In short, it reveals a sinful heart of rebellion and a total disregard for the *parent-child* relationship.

Or think about a relationship between a husband and a wife. Suppose my wife asks me to pick up coffee for her on the way back from a meeting, and I tell her that I would do it. And then, after the meeting, I come up with coffee for myself and no coffee for her. And as she's searching through the bag, she asks me, "Where's my

coffee?” And I look over and smile, and say, “Oh, actually, I didn’t get you one.” And she asks, “Why not?” And I just say, “Oh, once I was there, I remembered how I do so many other things for you like wash the dishes, wipe the table after dinner, and throw out the trash, so I thought that was good enough. So I just got a coffee for myself this time. Sorry, I hope you’ll understand. Just keep in mind all the other things I do for you.”

I know this sounds ridiculous, but just think about this for a moment. Is the real issue here about whether or not I got my wife coffee? No. It’s about what my actions *communicate* about how I *regard* my wife. It reveals a sinful heart of self-centeredness and a total disregard for my *spousal* relationship with her.

And so it is with God’s law. It’s not so much about whether or not we have done something big or small, but it’s about what our actions *communicate* about how we regard God as our King.

Look at the rest of verse 11.

“If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.”

At first glance, this seems a bit obvious. It would be absurd for someone to say, “What’s the big deal? I didn’t commit adultery—I just murdered someone.” And James wants us to see the absurdity of that kind of thinking.

It’s interesting that he chose *these* two examples from the Ten Commandments because these are two so-called “big sins” that most of us would probably say we don’t do.

Perhaps he could have chosen the tenth commandment, “You shall not covet” (Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21; cf. Rom. 7:7), and we would have all easily realized that we’ve broken that commandment. We’ve all coveted, or longed for what does not belong to us—we’ve all *envied* others or *resented* what God has given us or others.

But even if we could admit that, I think we would still be tempted to think, “But what’s the big deal? We all covet”—just like we might be tempted to think, “What’s the big deal? We all show partiality.”

So James does not allow us to do that. Instead, after showing us that God’s law must be taken as a whole because they all come from the same God, and that all breaking of God’s law is *personal*, he wants us to see that, in the eyes of God, to say, “I didn’t commit adultery—I just showed partiality to someone” is just as absurd as to say, “I didn’t commit adultery—I just murdered someone.”⁴

This is reminiscent of what Jesus was getting at in his Sermon on the Mount. People were tempted to think, “What’s the big deal? I didn’t commit adultery—I just looked at someone with lustful intent.”

And what does Jesus say? Does he agree with the assessment that it’s no big deal? No, he says, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell” (Matt. 5:29-30).

Jesus says that what we might think is not that big of a deal makes us liable to judgment in *hell*—and we ought to take it so seriously that we’re willing to tear out our eye or cut off our hand to flee from sin.

Brothers and sisters, there is no room for this kind of “What’s the big deal?” kind of thinking when it comes to showing partiality or any kind of sin. We ought not to excuse sin, lighten sin, entertain sin, joke about sin, make up for sin, or cover sin. But whether it’s showing partiality, not loving our neighbor as ourselves, looking at

⁴ Robert L. Plummer, “James,” in *Hebrews-Revelation*, ESVEC (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

someone with lustful intent, committing adultery, or giving vent to our anger, or murdering someone—we ought to take them all seriously because of *who* we are ultimately sinning against.

When you remember that it is not merely breaking *a* law, but it is breaking *God's* law, then it does not matter how small or big the act may seem, but it is a total disregard for our holy God and gracious King who has created and loved us and gave us every good thing we have.

The better we understand that—the more *personal* and *relational* we understand *God's* law to be—then the more we will realize just how heinous or wicked every act of sin really is.

So first, showing partiality contradicts *God's evaluation*; second, it contradicts *God's law*, and third...

III. It contradicts God's mercy (vv. 12-13)

[¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.]

Look at verse 12.

This is James's conclusion to this whole section on showing no partiality. But he concludes *differently* than how we might expect.

We might expect him to say, "So speak and act as those *who show no partiality*," and that would come full circle to what he said at the beginning in his thesis in verse 1.

But that's *not* what he says. Instead, he says, "So speak and act as those *who are to be judged under the law of liberty*."

Now, this is not the first time he has used that phrase, "the law of liberty." He mentioned it earlier in chapter 1 verse 25, which Pastor Jeff expounded last week—and James means the same thing here.

The "law of liberty" is essentially the law as fulfilled by Christ on our behalf. It's a reference to the gospel.

Left to ourselves, God's law doesn't liberate us, but it condemns us—as James just showed us in the previous verses—because *none* of us have perfectly obeyed God's law as we should, and that's no small matter.

But for believers in Jesus Christ, we're freed from condemnation because of what Christ has done for us—*he* has perfectly obeyed God's law on our behalf, and *he* suffered the righteous judgment of God's wrath for *our* sins on the cross, and *he* resurrected to give us new and eternal life in him.

So, "to be judged under the law of liberty" is to be judged according to what Christ has done for us—according to God's mercy to us in Christ. It's to be judged as one who has received the gospel and therefore will not experience the just judgment for our sin on that final day.

If you're here today and you do not personally know the liberating power of this "law of liberty"—of the gospel of Jesus Jesus—then I plead with you to respond to this good news that God is holding out to you today through the preaching of his Word.

In our heart of hearts, we all know that something is wrong with us. Perhaps you try to tell yourself that the solution is just accepting yourself as you are, but you still see *sin* in your life—things that you think and do that you know is just not right, that you know are wrong, that you don't want to do but keep on doing—that you know you cannot just accept.

Perhaps you try to ease your conscience by telling yourself that you're at least better than most people. You're not adulterer or murderer. But now you see, there's no room for that in God's eyes.

Perhaps you try to throw yourself into a whirlwind of busyness and noise—all the things that need to be done for family and work and life, and all the things that need to be seen and experienced. But all the responsibilities and distractions in the world will not slow down the final judgment that is coming. Our life is but a mist and then comes judgment and eternity.

So I urge you to repent of your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ today to be forgiven of your sins and to be free from condemnation. Only then can you confront the honest reality of your sin and not be crushed. Only then can you be given a clear conscience, not by comparing yourself to others but by fixing your eyes on Christ who died for your sins and gave you his righteousness. Only then can you live in light of eternity and look forward to it because you know that it's not God's judgment that awaits you but only more of his goodness and mercy as you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Ps. 23:6).

I pray you would respond with such repentance and faith in Christ today.

<pause>

Now, going back, notice that James is not simply saying, "You're breaking God's law by showing partiality, so stop it!" No, he's not after simply behavioral modification but he's after gospel motivation. He's saying, "So speak and act as those who have received the gospel, as those who deserved God's judgment but who have received God's mercy in Christ."

And as those who have been shown such great mercy without distinction, how can we not show mercy to all without distinction?

But look at verse 13.

Here, James is warning his readers. If they do not show mercy to others, then God will not show mercy to them in the final judgment.

Is this some kind of works-righteousness? No, that would contradict what he just said in terms of "the law of liberty." So what does he mean?

Think of it this way: not everything that quacks is a duck, but every duck quacks.⁵

In other words, not everyone who shows mercy is a Christian, but every Christian shows mercy.

Therefore, if you profess to be a Christian and yet you repeatedly and unrepentantly withhold mercy to others, then it calls into question whether you've really been shown mercy in Christ at all—whether you're really a Christian.

⁵ Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 128, Kindle.

And if that's the case, then it doesn't matter what one professes to believe, that person can only expect to experience God's judgment on that final day.

Or in the language of partiality...

If we *continue* to show partiality (judging others based on their appearances, withholding mercy to those whom we deem as unworthy), then we contradict God's mercy in our lives—and we should fear God's just judgment (Matt. 18:32-35).

But by *not* showing partiality, we *evidence* that we have *indeed* been shown mercy by Christ. And so, we have no fear of God's judgment on that final day.

So James ends by *warning* his readers (and *us!*) to examine our lives, especially our interactions with others, in light of our profession of faith—and ask our, "Does the way I relate with others show that I've really been shown God's mercy?"

Conclusion

As we close, I want to call our attention back to verse 1, where "our Lord Jesus Christ" is called "the Lord of glory."

Just think about that for a moment. The *one* person we ought to pay *special* attention to is not the man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing, it's not those who embody the values of this passing world, it's not even the poor man in shabby clothing, but it is the Lord of glory.

And *remember* what the Lord of glory did—"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was *rich*, yet for *your* sake he became *poor*, so that *you* by *his* poverty might become *rich*" (2 Cor. 8:9).

The Lord of glory emptied himself not only of his riches but of his very life for the sake of poor sinners like us, so that all who repent and believe in him may be given all the riches of heaven. We were once spiritually bankrupt, but in his great mercy, the Lord of glory has given us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places through faith in him (Eph. 1:3).

And so, when we are tempted to show partiality, when we see the poor and the helpless and the outwardly unimpressive in the world, we ought to see a picture of *ourselves*—the lowly spiritual state that we were once in—and we ought to see the great mercy that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, has lavishly shown us.

That is the way to stop showing partiality and to truly love our neighbor as ourselves.

So let's fix our eyes on *him*, the Lord of glory.

The One Thing

Christians ought not to show partiality because it contradicts our God.

Let's pray.