

Impartial Love

James 2:1-13

SS Lesson for 11/29/2020

Devotional Scripture: Acts 10:9-34

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Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

A long-standing view among many people of various faiths holds that wealth is a sign of God's blessing. We reason (even if subconsciously) that if God is showing favor to this person, we should honor that person also. On the other hand, poverty is a sign of God's withholding his favor, perhaps even of God's curse. We reason that if people are suffering from poverty, their relationship with God must be negative, and we should not accommodate them. Nowhere is this erroneous belief seen more clearly than in prosperity gospel preaching and teaching. Simply put, ministers of this false doctrine teach that healing and wealth can both be yours, if you have enough faith, which is shown through how much money you give to the church. This often results in the ministers themselves becoming wealthy while their congregants wait for miracles of health and wealth that never seem to show up. The ministers are afforded great honor and position while many people suffer. But should wealthy members receive more attention and have more influence than members with little money? Are the wealthy really more beloved by God?

James described himself as a "servant of the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1). This author could have made a bolder claim, however, for he was the half-brother of Jesus. Everyone in their hometown of Nazareth assumed they were natural brothers, two out of five: Jesus, James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon (Mark 6:3). The order the brothers are listed in implies that James was the second oldest of the brothers and would have become the family head after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The boys grew up together in a faithful Jewish household in rural Galilee. They both learned the carpenter's trade in their father's workshop and studied and worshipped in the village synagogue. Although James did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah during Jesus' ministry (John 7:5), a dramatic change occurred after the resurrection, following an encounter with the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:7). Acts tells us that the brothers of Jesus (including James) were part of the earliest fellowship in Jerusalem that became the church (Acts 1:14). James became a leader in the Jerusalem church (15:13). It is not surprising, therefore, to find that James was very familiar with Jesus' teachings. He echoes the oral instruction of Jesus with confidence that his own teaching is true to Jesus' original intent. The epistle of James reflects a very early stage in the development of the church, when it was composed primarily of Jewish Christians. The congregation he is addressing in the letter seems to be made up entirely of Jewish believers in Christ. So, for example, James could easily reference Jewish customs or laws without needing to explain himself to his audience (see James 2:8-11). His audience would have been familiar with the value of the Jewish law for ethical guidance, while understanding its inadequacy for salvation by faith in Christ.

Key Verse: James 2:5

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?

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

One who is properly related to the Bible is also properly related to the body of Christ. He who stands with confidence serves with compassion. James just made it clear that true religion finds an outlet in service, a service which demands that a believer learn to accept others without prejudice and to assist others without presumption. James became increasingly specific and direct in his admonitions and instructions. He was obviously displeased with the inconsistencies among the brethren. He attacked the attitudes these believers displayed toward others and then complained of their failures to act as they should. He first condemned the

attitude of favoritism and gave suggestions on how to combat this obstacle to spiritual maturity. One must learn to accept others, whatever their status or class. He must show courtesy to all, compassion for all, and consistency to all. Equity, love, and fidelity are the vital ingredients.

2:1. A transition to a new consideration is evident by James' use of **my brothers**. By "brothers" he meant fellow **believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ**. The NIV has done well in showing that it is the faith *in* Christ, not the faith *of* Christ, that is here considered, and in taking the word "glorious" (*doxēs*) in apposition to, and therefore descriptive of, Christ. The key command is likewise clear: **don't show favoritism**. God shows no favoritism (Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25); therefore neither should Christians. James condemned prejudice and preferential treatment.

2:2-3. The issue addressed is then illustrated. The illustration's hypothetical nature, evident in the Greek "if clause," is shown with the word **suppose**. The specific situation is then presented. A **gold-fingered** and brilliantly clothed man comes **into** the **meeting** place, here designated as a synagogue which emphasizes the Jewish character of both the epistle and this scene. A **poor man** in dirty **clothes** also enters. The word **shabby** (*rypara*, "dirty" or "vile") is found only here and in Revelation 22:11. (Cf. the word *ryparian*, "moral filth," which James used in 1:21.) **Special attention** (lit., "to gaze upon") and preferential seating is given to the rich man, and standing room only or an inferior seat **on the floor** (lit., "under my footstool") is afforded the **poor man**.

2:4. The illustration is followed by a penetrating inquiry: **Have you not discriminated among yourselves?** The question in Greek assumes an affirmative answer. James' brethren must plead guilty not only to discriminatory divisions but also to assuming the role of **judges with evil thoughts** of partiality.

2:5-7. With the plea, **Listen, my dear brothers**, James went on to explain why their preferential judgment was wrong. He made his point through four questions, each of which anticipated an affirmative answer. First, **Has not God chosen those** who appear **poor** materially, but are **rich** spiritually, **to inherit** His promised **kingdom?** (cf. 1:9) Second, Are not **the rich** the ones who are consistently guilty of oppression, extortion, and slander (*blasphēmousin*, 2:7, lit., "blasphemy"). Third, **Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?** Fourth, **Are they not the ones who** slander Jesus' **noble name?** Believers **belong to Him**, not to the rich exploiters. James' readers would have to agree with these contentions, and to recognize that insulting **the poor** and favoring the rich was wrong and totally unreasonable.

2:8-9. The alternatives are clear. Love is right. Favoritism is sin. James was optimistic; the "if-clause," **if you really keep the royal law**, was written in Greek in such a way that an obedient response was anticipated. The "royal law" was given in Leviticus 19:18 and affirmed by Christ (Matt. 22:39): **Love your neighbor as yourself**. The law is royal or regal (*basilikon*, from *basileus*, "king") because it is decreed by the King of kings, is fit for a king, and is considered the king of laws. The phrase reflects the Latin *lex regia* known throughout the Roman Empire. Obedience to this law, nonpreferential love, is the answer to the evident disobedience to God's **Law**, prejudicial **favoritism**.

2:10-11. James was aware there would be some who would tend to dismiss their offense of prejudice as a trivial fault. They would hardly consider themselves as lawbreakers. James went on to make it clear that this was no small offense. **Whoever keeps the whole Law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it**. There are no special indulgences. Utilizing the extreme instances of **adultery** and **murder**, James showed the absurdity of inconsistent obedience.

2:12-13. Total obedience is the key. One must both habitually **speak and act** (Gr. pres. tense imper.) as those **to be judged by the Law**. God's Law, because of its wise constraints, brings true **freedom** (cf. 1:25). Disobedience to God's Law brings bondage; and to those who have **not been merciful**, God's **judgment is without mercy**. Just as love triumphs over prejudice, **mercy triumphs over judgment**. The verb "triumphs" or "exults over" (*katakauchatai*) appears only here, in 3:14, and in Romans 11:18. God has ordained unalterable laws. Complete and consistent obedience is required if spiritual maturity is to be attained. The believer is commanded to accept his brother with courtesy, compassion, and consistency.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

The Injustice of Favoritism (James 2:1-4)

- 1 My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.
- 2 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,
- 3 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,"
- 4 have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Injustice of favoritism in faith (1)

Injustice in faith by having a motive of pride (Matt 23:1-7)

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. 5 "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'

Injustice in faith by associating with only friends and family (Luke 14:12-14)

12 Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Injustice in faith through envy (John 4:1)

4 The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John,

Injustice in faith by using God's Word incorrectly to discriminate (Acts 10:28)

28 He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean."

Injustice in faith through peer pressures (Gal 2:11-13)

11 When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. 12 Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

Injustice in faith through boasting and thinking more highly of oneself than others (Luke 18:11-14)

11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Injustice in practice (2-3)

Injustice in practice because of status (Deut 1:17)

17 Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it.

Injustice in practice because of wealth (Lev 19:15)

15 "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

Injustice in practice through perverting justice (Deut 16:19)

19 Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous.

Injustice in practice by not keeping God's Word (1 Tim 5:21)

21 I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.

Injustice in practice through secretly showing partiality (Job 13:10)

10 He would surely rebuke you if you secretly showed partiality.

Injustice in practice shouldn't be done because there is no partiality with God (Rom 2:11)

11 For God does not show favoritism.

Injustice in relationships (4)

Injustice in relationships by allowing worldly standards to stand in the way of fellowship (John 4:27)

27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

Injustice in relationships should not happen because all Christians are one in Jesus (Gal 3:27-28)

27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Injustice in relationships should not happen because all Christians are members of one body (1 Cor 12:12)

12 The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

Injustice in relationships should not happen because God has no distinction between Christians (Rom 10:12)

12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him,

The Inconsistency of Favoritism (James 2:5-7)

5 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?

6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts?

7 Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?

God's view (5)

God shows no favoritism between the rich and the poor because they are all the work of His hands (Job 34:19)

19 who shows no partiality to princes and does not favor the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands?

God is not unjust (Heb 6:10)

10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

God shows no favoritism and accepts no bribes (Deut 10:17)

17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

There is no injustice with God (2 Chron 19:7)

7 Now let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery."

God is Master over all (Eph 6:9)

9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

God judges impartially (1 Peter 1:17)

17 Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.

World's view (6-7)

The world views people based on their own standard and does not see the new creation in a person (2 Cor 5:16-17)

16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

The world does not accept all men from every nation (Acts 10:34-35)

34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

The world judges by outward appearances that does not result in right judgments (John 7:24)

24 Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

The world's view depends on surface things (2 Cor 10:7)

7 You are looking only on the surface of things. If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he.

The world's view seeks answers through human ideas (Acts 17:16-21)

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

The Iniquity of Favoritism (James 2:8-13)

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well;

9 but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

10 For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.

11 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.

12 So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty.

13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Iniquity in not loving (8-9)

Iniquity in not loving others (1 John 4:20-21)

20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Iniquity in hating our brothers and sisters (1 John 2:9-10)

9 Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.

Iniquity in following Satan's attributes and not loving our brothers (1 John 3:10)

10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.

Iniquity in anger with others (Matt 5:21-22)

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Iniquity in disobedience to God's Word (10-11)

Disobedience through being deceived by empty words (Eph 5:6)

6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

Disobedience through minds being corrupted (Titus 1:15-16)

15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. 16 They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.

Disobedience because of rejecting the gospel (Heb 4:6)

6 It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.

Disobedience because of not accepting God's advice (Prov 1:29-31)

29 Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, 30 since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, 31 they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.

Disobedience through forsaking God's word (Jer 9:13-14)

13 The Lord said, "It is because they have forsaken my law, which I set before them; they have not obeyed me or followed my law. 14 Instead, they have followed the stubbornness of their hearts; they have followed the Baals, as their fathers taught them."

Disobedience through violating God's covenant Word (Deut 17:2-5)

2 If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the Lord gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God in violation of his covenant, 3 and contrary to my command has worshiped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars of the sky, 4 and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, 5 take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death.

Iniquity in not showing mercy (12-13)

Not showing mercy because of shutting ears to the cries of others (Prov 21:13)

13 If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.

Not showing mercy because of ungratefulness (Matt 18:28-19:1)

28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' 30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Not showing mercy through not helping others (Matt 25:41-46)

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' 44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' 45 "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' 46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment

Not showing mercy because of wickedness (Prov 21:10)

10 The wicked man craves evil; his neighbor gets no mercy from him.

Not showing mercy because of disobedience (Jer 21:3-7)

3 But Jeremiah answered them, "Tell Zedekiah, 4 "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I am about to turn against you the weapons of war that are in your hands, which you are using to fight the king of Babylon and the Babylonians who are outside the wall besieging you. And I will gather them inside this city. 5 I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm in anger and fury and great wrath. 6 I will strike down those who live in this city — both men and animals — and they will die of a terrible plague. 7 After that, declares the Lord, I will hand over Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the people in this city who survive the plague, sword and famine, to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and to their enemies who seek their lives. He will put them to the sword; he will show them no mercy or pity or compassion.'

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Faith and Favoritism (James 2:1-13)

1 My brothers and sisters, do not show prejudice if you possess faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. 2 For if someone comes into your assembly wearing a gold ring and fine clothing, and a poor person enters in filthy clothes, 3 do you pay attention to the one finely dressed and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and to the poor person, “You stand over there,” or “Sit under my feet”? 4 If so, have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil motives? 5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters! Did not God choose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor! Are not the rich oppressing you and dragging you into the courts? 7 Do they not blaspheme the good name of the one you belong to? 8 But if you fulfill the royal law as expressed in this scripture, “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**,” you are doing well. 9 But if you show prejudice, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as violators. 10 For the one who obeys 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**.” Now if you do not commit adultery but you commit murder, you have become a violator of the law. 12 Speak and act as those who will be judged by a law that gives freedom. 13 For judgment is merciless for the one who has shown no mercy. But mercy triumphs over judgment.

James begins by setting down a principle in verse 1, which might be paraphrased in this way:

“Favoritism is not compatible with the Christian faith.”

This principle is rooted in the character of God, who does not show partiality, and who commands His people not to do so, either:

17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God and awesome warrior who is unbiased and takes no bribe, 18 who acts justly toward orphan and widow, and who loves resident foreigners, giving them food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10:17-18).

6 He [Jehoshaphat] told the judges, “Be careful what you do, for you are not judging for men, but for the LORD, who will be with you when you make judicial decisions. 7 Respect the LORD and make careful decisions, for the LORD our God disapproves of injustice, partiality, and bribery” (2 Chronicles 19:6-7; see also Job 34:19; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:9).

God is always just, and His judgments are always without partiality. God’s Word declares that each and every person without exception is a sinner, deserving of eternal judgment (Romans 3:9-19, 23). Men are not saved on the basis of race (contrary to Jewish thought), nor on the basis of wealth or position, nor on the basis of their good works. Men are saved on the basis of God’s sovereign choice, which has nothing to do with man’s merit. Men are saved on the basis of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, in the sinner’s place. That is grace, and grace is unmerited. Since God shows no partiality, He insists that we be like Him in this regard. Favoritism, then, is incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ.

James now provides an illustration of the principle he has just stated. He sets the scene in church. Two men enter the church at the same time. One of the two is wealthy. He is wearing a gold ring and “**fine clothing**.” Literally, he is wearing “shining” or “bright” clothing. The rich man is dressed in a way that is intended to display his wealth. He wants others, including the usher, to know that he is a man of wealth? Why? Because he desires to be treated with partiality.

The other man (who arrives at the same time as the rich man) is poor. His clothes give him away. The difference is that the rich man is purposely wearing clothing that signals his wealth to others. The poor man has nothing else to wear. His clothing sends a signal that he does not really desire. The poor man’s clothing is not just old, and it is not just ragged. Literally, the poor man’s clothing is filthy. This same word “**filthy**” is used only one other time in the New Testament, in Revelation 22:11, where it describes those who are morally filthy, and who will not enter into the kingdom of God. In the early 1970’s, when the “Jesus” people began to attend churches with their bare feet and less than clean clothes, there was some real consternation because these folks literally did dirty up the church.

The usher (“**you**”) immediately responds. He does not disappoint the rich man. The brightly attired guest is given a warm welcome and ushered to one of the finest seats; the poor man is barely tolerated and told to stand off out of the way, or to sit at the usher’s feet. (Notice that this man is not only given the poorest seating, but he is not allowed to sit on anything that he might soil with his filthy garments.) In responding to wealth and

poverty in this way, the usher (or, in reality, the church) is guilty of sin. James will press this point home with several powerful arguments in verses 5-13.

First, in showing preferential treatment to the rich, one acts contrary to Christ (verses 5-6a).

5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters! Did not God choose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor!

When our Lord came to the earth at His incarnation, He came to heal the sick and to save the lost; He came to those who were needy. He came to lift up the humble and needy and to put down the arrogant:

50 "From generation to generation he is merciful to those who fear him.

51 He has demonstrated power with his arm; he has scattered those whose pride wells up from the sheer arrogance of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up those of lowly position;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering his mercy. . ." (Luke 1:50-54).

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and the regaining of sight to the blind,

to set free those who are oppressed,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, citing Isaiah 61:1-2).

29 Then Levi gave a great banquet in his house for Jesus, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. 30 But the Pharisees and their experts in the law complained to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" 31 Jesus answered them, "Those who are well don't need a physician, but those who are sick do. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:29-32).

26 Think about the circumstances of your call, brothers and sisters. Not many were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were members of the upper class. 27 But God chose what the world thinks foolish to shame the wise, and God chose what the world thinks weak to shame the strong. 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, to set aside what is regarded as something, 29 so that no one can boast in his presence. 30 He is the reason you have a relationship with Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*" (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

It is no wonder, then, that we would read these words from the lips of our Lord:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God belongs to you.

21 "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

22 "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil on account of the Son of Man! 23 Rejoice in that day, and jump for joy, because your reward is great in heaven. For their ancestors did the same things to the prophets" (Luke 6:20b-23).

God has chosen to save us and to bring us to glory, but when we discriminate against the poor, we choose to humiliate those whom God has chosen to bless. To discriminate against the poor and to favor the rich is to act in a way that is contrary to our Lord and to the way in which we were saved. To discriminate against the poor is to act contrary to the gospel, which is a matter of grace, not merit.

Second, to show partiality toward the rich flies in the face of our experience and common sense (verses 6b-7).

Are not the rich oppressing you and dragging you into the courts? 7 Do they not blaspheme the good name of the one you belong to?

Remember that James is writing to Jewish Christians who are dispersed among the nations. They have begun to experience persecution. Some of their poverty was the direct result of their generosity (see Acts 2:44-46; 4:32-37), and some was the result of persecution because of following Christ (see Hebrews 10:32-34). The rich were quick to drag them into court. They could afford the legal costs and could also influence the outcome of the trial. As a rule, the rich were not a friend to the Jewish saints; they were their enemy. Why, then, would anyone show favoritism to their opponents? Rather than "biting the hand that fed them," they were "feeding the hand of those who were biting them." And if this personal insult and injury were not enough, the rich were also those

who were blaspheming the very name of our Lord (compare Psalm 73:1-14, especially verses 8-9). Favoring the rich is contrary to all good reason.

Third, to show partiality toward the rich was to break God's law (verses 8-11):

8 But if you fulfill the royal law as expressed in this scripture, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*,” you are doing well. 9 But if you show prejudice, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as violators. 10 For the one who obeys 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*.” Now if you do not commit adultery but you commit murder, you have become a violator of the law. 12 Speak and act as those who will be judged by a law that gives freedom. 13 For judgment is merciless for the one who has shown no mercy. But mercy triumphs over judgment.

The royal law commanded God's people to “love their neighbors *as* themselves” (note the emphasis on “*as*”). Their neighbors included the wealthy and the poor (see Luke 10:29-37). The “*as*” means that we must love our neighbors *as* we love ourselves. We must love our neighbors with the same level of concern and care that we have for ourselves. But in addition to meaning that we must love our neighbors and ourselves equally, James insists that we must love each of our neighbors equally, not treating one neighbor better than another. The royal law calls for equality. Showing partiality violates the principle of “equal treatment under the law.”

To show partiality to the rich and to discriminate against the poor is to break God's law. And to break God's law in this one matter is to become a violator of the whole law. These Jews to whom James wrote were no doubt scrupulous in keeping other parts of the law, but James says that this is of no value if the law is broken in the matter of dealing equally with our neighbors. Thus, we may not be guilty of breaking the law by committing adultery, but if we murder, then we are lawbreakers anyway. To break the law at one point is to break the whole law. Those who show partiality to others are law-breakers.

Fourth, to show partiality in our judgments is to ignore the certainty of consequences when we stand before Christ as our Judge (verses 12-13).

12 Speak and act as those who will be judged by a law that gives freedom. 13 For judgment is merciless for the one who has shown no mercy. But mercy triumphs over judgment.

Those who show partiality make judgments about others based upon mere appearances (the bright and shining clothing of the rich man as opposed to the filthy clothing of the poor man). Those who discriminate become judges with impure motives (verse 4). Those who judge are also those who will be judged. There is a day of judgment coming for all men. There is a judgment for unbelievers (John 5:22-29; Acts 17:30-31; Hebrews 9:27), just as there is a different day of judgment for the saints (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). If men have not shown mercy to those in need, then they should not expect God to be merciful to them in their day of judgment:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7).

1 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. 2 For by the standard you judge you will be judged, and the measure you use will be the measure you receive” (Matthew 7:1-2; see also 18:21-25).

I have a friend named Zeke who is now retired, but who once was a high level executive for a large company. Zeke had never before involved himself with things like protesting against abortion clinics, but for some reason he felt led to do so on one occasion. It was on that occasion that Zeke was arrested, along with the others who were with him outside an abortion clinic. The judge would not allow Zeke to speak of his faith in Christ or to cite Scripture. He found Zeke guilty of breaking the law. After the judge pronounced sentence, Zeke said to the judge, “Your honor, someday you will stand in judgment before The Great Judge, and you will give an account for what you have done today.” These are sobering words, not unlike those of James.

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/2-words-and-works-practical-piety-james-21-26>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Over 1,900 years ago, James gave definitive answers for how the church should live and behave. James offered these two ethical foundations, the royal law and the law of liberty, to guide the church. Both of these were learned from his half-brother, Jesus. These two laws go together. If we see others as our neighbors in need, whether they are beloved friends or reviled enemies, we must show mercy, not discrimination. If we set aside our natural impulse to favor certain visitors, we will find unexpected opportunities to share the love that wells up in our hearts. We should lead with love, never doubting God's willingness to show kindness to us. Churches should practice self-examination using these complementary laws. What things do we do that favor certain people over others? Do our church leaders represent the diversity of our church body, or are they predominately well-off financially, well-educated, and of a certain ethnicity that does not represent the whole? Is our congregation known as a loving place or a judgmental place? Does our community recognize us as people who take them seriously? Our answers to these questions will help us see as a congregation how we measure up to the standard of the two laws. Jesus did not treat people according to divisions of wealth or poverty, or perceived blessings or curses. James, his brother, did not either. Instead, James and Jesus show that God loves the poor, and we should too. This issue has not gone away in the nearly 2,000 years since James wrote, and we do well to listen to him today.

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

Discrimination in the Church - Prejudice and preferential treatment are always wrong. Treating a person in a certain way based on their external circumstances can be very dishonoring and hurtful. This is contrary to God's character; He cares for all His children regardless of their social status. James wrote during a time when people continuously judged each other based on class, ethnicity, nationality, apparel, or religious background. High-minded people looked down upon and mistreated those of the lower economic class—slaves, beggars, barbarians, and even women. When Jesus walked the earth, He corrected this prejudicial thinking. He demonstrated through His actions and teaching that God sees all of humanity as valuable, deserving of His love. It is always wrong to discriminate against people because of the size of their pocketbook, the color of their skin, the size of their nose, or any other such distinction.

Partial Treatment - James gave an example of two men who came into a church meeting, one in elegant clothing but the other poor and filthy. How would the congregation respond? Would the wealthy man get the best seat in the house and the other man be placed in the back of the church—closely watched? This is not God's heart. Indeed, the Scriptures indicate that a poor man is more likely to seek God because of his need, whereas a rich person may depend upon possessions and see no need for divine assistance (1 Tim. 6:6-10). God's children are not to show favoritism. James points out that if we treat people differently based on something external, we are violating God's law. Some may try to say, "Well, that's not as bad as adultery, stealing, or some other sin." But James wanted to make it crystal clear—favoritism is a sin. Other sins do not "trump" it. Pastor Charles Swindell sums it up well: "If there is one place where class distinctions should break down, it is in the place of worship where color, political persuasion, type of Christian experience, money, status, rank, name, apparel, smell, size, and age mean nothing."