

SERIES ON JAMES

**Love is Incompatible with Discrimination**

James 2:1-13; Jerry Truex; September 19, 2010

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**A. Introduction**

Today we continue our series on James. In our passage today, favoritism is forbidden.

The main idea of the passage we are looking at is this: “Don’t discriminate or show favoritism, because it is inconsistent with God’s choice of the poor (v. 5), with the law of love (v. 8), and our experience of God’s mercy toward us (v. 13)

**B. Warning: Favoritism incompatible with the faith/example of Jesus (2:1)**

<p><sup>1</sup> My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really <u>believe in</u> our glorious Lord <u>Jesus Christ</u>? (NRSV)</p>	<p>Ἄδελφοί μου, μὴ ἐν προσωπολημψίαις ἔχετε τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης.</p>
<p><sup>1</sup> My brothers and sister, do not hold <u>the faith of Jesus Christ</u>, our Lord of Glory, together with <i>acts of favoritism</i> (JT)</p>	

Verse one is difficult to translate into English. There are two issues:

**1. Imperative: “Do not hold...”**

(i) The NRSV reads it as a question, the only major translation to do so.

However, like most of the major translations (KJV, NASB, NIV, RSV) I read it as an imperative (μὴ ... ἔχετε... “Do not hold...”). It is a present imperative, so it can be translated “stop holding!—stop holding the faith of Jesus with acts of favoritism.”

**2. The faith (example) of Jesus**

(ii) The NRSV translates τὴν πίστιν... Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as “believe in ... Jesus Christ” (an objective genitive). In this view, the phrase refers to believing something about Jesus. It doesn’t tell us what is believed about Jesus, but whatever it is, it is not compatible with favoritism.

However, I read that phrase as “the faith ... of Jesus Christ” (a subjective genitive).<sup>1</sup> In this view, the phrase refers to the *faithfulness of Jesus* or the *example of Jesus*. This makes better sense. The faithfulness/example of Jesus is incompatible with favoritism. Jesus did not show favoritism, nor should we.

Verse 1 is a warning: Do not think you can follow the faith/example Jesus and show favoritism toward certain people.

**3. Favoritism (Gk. *prosōpolēmpsia*)**

What does “favoritism” mean?

The word “favoritism” is *prosō-po-lēm-psia* (προσωπολημψία) in the Greek. It literally means “to receive someone according to the face.”<sup>2</sup> So verse 1 tell us not to judge people on the basis of appearance—gender, race, social status, etc.—and it suggests that we need to make decisions on the basis of merits of the case or the particulars of the circumstance.

**4. Our Lord of Glory (Heb. *shekinah*)**

Notice that Jesus is referred to as “our Lord of glory” (τοῦ κυρίου ... τῆς δόξης). In the OT and in Jewish tradition (especially the Targums), the visible manifestation of the Divine Presence was referred to as the *shekinah* (*shi'kee-na*) or “the glory.”

If this is what James has in mind, then the faith/example of Jesus is the *shekinah*, the visible manifestation of God’s Glory.

**C. Illustration: Discrimination Against the Poor (2:2-4)**

<p><sup>2</sup> For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly [synagogue], and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in,<sup>3</sup> and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet,"<sup>4</sup> have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?</p>	<p><sup>2</sup> ἂν γὰρ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς συναγωγὴν ὑμῶν ἀνὴρ χρυσοδακτύλιος ἐν ἔσθῃτι λαμπρᾷ, εἰσέλθῃ δὲ καὶ πτωχὸς ἐν ῥυπαρᾷ ἔσθῃτι, <sup>3</sup> ἐπιβλέψῃτε δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν φοροῦντα τὴν ἔσθῃτα τὴν λαμπρὰν καὶ εἴπητε· σὺ κάθου ὧδε καλῶς, καὶ τῷ πτωχῷ εἴπητε· σὺ στήθι ἐκεῖ ἢ κάθου ὑπὸ τὸ ὑποπόδιόν μου, <sup>4</sup> οὐ διεκρίθητε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς καὶ ἐγένεσθε κριταὶ διαλογισμῶν πονηρῶν;</p>
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James gives an illustration of favoritism in the form of a question (covering vv. 2-5). The illustration presents two guests at an assembly/synagogue (συναγωγὴν).

<sup>1</sup> See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven & London: Doubleday, 1995) 217, 220.

<sup>2</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 106.

## 1. Rich man

The first person is obviously wealthy. He (ἄνθρωπος) has gold rings (plural) and luxurious clothing. All but the wealthy wore homemade clothing.<sup>3</sup> He enters the gathering in a way that guarantees to bring attention, flaunting his wealth in a largely poor congregation.

## 2. Poor person

The second person is “poor, in filthy clothing”; the word “poor” (πτωχός) indicates this person lives at the subsistence or survival level; perhaps a day-laborer, a homeless person, or beggar. He has one set of clothes and they are disgustingly unclean or defiled (ῥυπαρός).

The wealthy man was ushered to a privileged seat, whereas the poor person was ordered to either stand or sit on the floor. This illustrates “favoritism”—the wealthy man gets preferential treatment.

## 3. You have discriminated (divided yourselves)

Finally, in verse 4, James gets to the question: “Have you not discriminated?” The question (with the “not,” οὐ) assumes a positive answer: “Yes, you have discriminated.”<sup>4</sup>

They have discriminated or divided—*diakrinō*—“among themselves.” “They are trying to live by two measures at once and are ‘divided in consciences.’”<sup>5</sup>

## 4. You are judges with evil thoughts

The final word in this paragraph is this: “You have become judges with evil thoughts.” Why were they called evil? Why was this type of discrimination so bad?

First, notice that verse 4 assumes that the Christian community was *egalitarian*. All people have equal status and value before God. No one is greater or more important than another person. Verse 4 assumes egalitarianism and it is explicitly stated in the Law of Moses.

**Lev. 19:15.** You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. (NRSV)

Second, the congregation disregarded God’s standard of justice. They rejected the idea that all people are of equal value and status. Consciously or unconsciously they thought they would somehow profit from the wealthy man, so why not flatter or butter him up.

<sup>3</sup> David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 116.

<sup>4</sup> The word for “made distinctions” (διεκρίθητε ind. aor. pass. 2<sup>nd</sup> pl. of διακρίνω) can be rendered “judgment” or “make a decision”.

<sup>5</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven & London: Doubleday, 1995) 217, 223.

So the congregation rejected God's standard and substituted a cultural standard. This suggests that the basis of for all discrimination lies in accepting cultural, socially constructed standards of judgment, and not accepting God's.

## D. Rationale: Three Reasons not to Discriminate (2:5-11)

Why shouldn't Christians discriminate? James gives us three reasons.

### 1. Inconsistent with God's choice of the poor (5-6a)

<sup>5</sup> Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? <sup>6</sup> But you have dishonored the poor.

<sup>5</sup> Ἀκούσατε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί· οὐχ ὁ θεὸς ἐξελέξατο τοὺς πτωχοὺς τῷ κόσμῳ πλουσίους ἐν πίστει καὶ κληρονόμους τῆς βασιλείας ἧς ἐπηγγείλατο τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν; <sup>6</sup> ὁμεῖς δὲ ἠτιμάσατε τὸν πτωχόν.

Here is the first reason not to discriminate against the poor: God has chosen the poor! James asks: "Has not God [repeatedly] chosen the poor?"<sup>6</sup>

#### a. The poor

Who are the poor? These poor are "poor" in the world's eyes. That is, they are "poor" by the world's standards. It refers to economic poverty, but more than that. It is a metaphor that refers to people who do not have what the world thinks is valuable—money, status, power.

The world measures human value in certain ways, but God measures human value in other ways.<sup>7</sup> James thought is very similar to Paul's.

**1 Cor. 1:27-28.** But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are (NRSV).

Behind this thought is the notion that God chose the people of Israel, who were poor and weak slaves in Egypt.<sup>8</sup> This also carries over to the Christian community. God chooses the poor, the weak, and those of low value by the world's standards.

Why does God chose the poor? In Jewish thought, "the poor" were considered to be *pious* because they had nothing to turn for help except only God. The poor relied on

<sup>6</sup> (ἐξελέξατο as a gnomic or timeless aorist), which assumes a "yes" answer.

<sup>7</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven & London: Doubleday, 1995) 224.

<sup>8</sup> Deut. 4:37; 7:7; LXX Psa 32:12; 134:4; Isa 14:1; 43:10.

God and became great people of faith. God is on the side of the poor, not because they are poor, but because they draw near to God and God draws near to them.<sup>9</sup>

### b. Rich in faith

What does it mean to be “rich in faith”? “Rich” cannot mean physical wealth, but a surplus of some kind. It probably means having *an abundant ability to rely on God* and to live in relative peace and security no matter the physical poverty or the lack of status in one’s culture.

So, the first reason for not showing favoritism, especially to the rich, is that giving preferential treatment to the wealthy over the poor is to reject God’s standards.

## 2. Inconsistent with kowtowing to the rich (6b-7)

<p><sup>6</sup> But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? <sup>7</sup> Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?</p>	<p><sup>6</sup> ὑμεῖς δὲ ἠτιμάσατε τὸν πτωχόν. οὐχ οἱ πλούσιοι καταδυναστεύουσιν ὑμῶν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔλκουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς κριτήρια; <sup>7</sup> οὐκ αὐτοὶ βλασφημοῦσιν τὸ καλὸν ὄνομα τὸ ἐπικληθὲν ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς;</p>
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Here is the second reason not to discriminate against the poor: The rich oppress the poor.

“Clearly, these are not Christian rich people; rather, James is referring to the non-Christian rich as a class.”<sup>10</sup> The word for “oppression” is in the present tense. So it is ongoing. The congregation is undergoing persecution by the rich—but sadly, the congregation defers to this group, they still hold the rich in high esteem, even though they are being harmed and humiliated by the rich.

One type of oppression that was occurring was their use of the court system. They were being “dragged” or forced to go to court. Perhaps the rich were repossessing or foreclosing on the property of the poorer people. Perhaps the rich were attempting to collect debts owed by the poor. But they were blaspheming the name of Jesus and Christians, who were baptized in his name.

Notice that James does not condemn the rich for being rich, but he condemns their actions that economically oppressed and verbally abused the poor.

<sup>9</sup> James 4:7-8. See also comments by Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 106.

<sup>10</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 114.

Most importantly, James is pointing out the ridiculous nature of *kowtowing*<sup>11</sup> to people who treat the poor in this manner. Why try to flatter or gain favor from people who are simply out to line their own pockets?

The second reason for not showing favoritism, especially to the rich, is that the rich perennially have been against God and his people and have demonstrated themselves to be against Christ and the church.

**3. Inconsistent with the Law of Love (8-11)**

<p><sup>8</sup> You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [Lev. 19:18] <sup>9</sup> But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. <sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. <sup>11</sup> For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.</p>	<p><sup>8</sup> Εἰ μέντοι νόμον τελεῖτε βασιλικὸν κατὰ τὴν γραφήν· ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτὸν, καλῶς ποιεῖτε· <sup>9</sup> εἰ δὲ προσωπολημπτεῖτε, ἁμαρτίαν ἐργάζεσθε ἐλεγχόμενοι ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου ὡς παραβάται. <sup>10</sup> ὅστις γὰρ ὅλον τὸν νόμον τηρήσῃ πταισῆ δὲ ἐν ἐνί, γέγονεν πάντων ἔνοχος. <sup>11</sup> ὁ γὰρ εἰπὼν· μὴ μοιχεύσης, εἶπεν καί· μὴ φονεύσης· εἰ δὲ οὐ μοιχεύεις φονεύεις δέ, γέγονας παραβάτης νόμου.</p>
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Here we have the third reason not to discriminate against the poor: It is contrary to the "royal law," which is summed up by the law of love.

**a. Royal law = law of love**

James states that people benefit when they fulfill or keep the "royal law." The question is what is the "royal law"?

There are many interpretations, but the best is this: The royal law refers Jesus' interpretation of the Torah (the Mosaic Law).<sup>12</sup> And that, in turn, is summarized "Love your neighbor as yourself," a quotation of Lev. 19:18, which Jesus' repeats (Mk 12:29-31).

**Lev. 19:18** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

James is saying, if we are obedient to the love commandment of Lev. 19:18, we fulfill the "royal law"—we fulfill Jesus' understanding of the law—also called the "perfect law" (1:25) and the "law of liberty" (1:25; 2:13).

<sup>11</sup> Try to gain favor by cringing or flattering; bend the knees and bow in a servile manner.

<sup>12</sup> So David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 121.

### b. Showing partiality breaks the law (of love)

Next, James goes argues that “showing partiality” (προσωπολημπτέω; pres. ind. act. 2:9) or “favoritism” (προσωποληψία; 2:1) breaks the law of love.

It’s important to note James is talking about “practicing partiality.” This is an ongoing habit or practice, not a one-off event. It refers to “willfully” showing favoritism or “willfully” discriminating against the poor (literally and metaphorically).

1. If you show partiality/favoritism
2. You break the law (of love)
3. Thus you are a transgressor (παραβάτης), commit sin (ἀμαρτίαν ἐργάζεσθε)

Discrimination or partiality or favoritism—whatever you call it—is sin because it breaks the law (of love).

### c. Showing partiality breaks the whole law

Since each individual commandment is part and parcel of the one indivisible whole law, then breaking one law—he gives the examples of murder and adultery—even if you keep all the others, is to transgress the whole law.

James’ point is if one shows partiality, even if one keeps all the other 612 laws of the Torah, one is a transgressor. In contrast, if you keep the one law of love, you keep the whole Torah.

The third reason for not showing favoritism, especially to the rich, is that it violates the law of love, which makes one a transgressor of the whole law.

## E. Exhortation: Live by the Law of Liberty (2:12-13)

<sup>12</sup> So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. <sup>13</sup> For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

<sup>12</sup> οὕτως λαλεῖτε καὶ οὕτως ποιεῖτε ὡς διὰ νόμου ἐλευθερίας μέλλοντες κρίνεσθαι. <sup>13</sup> ἢ γὰρ κρίσις ἀνέλεος τῷ μὴ ποιήσαντι ἔλεος· κατακαυχᾶται ἔλεος κρίσεως.

Finally, James warns the reader about judgment! But there is good news here. He tells the readers to speak and act—to live—according to the law of love, which he now calls the law of liberty.

Basically, James says, “If you speak and act in love, if you are merciful toward others, then God will regard you with the same love and mercy.”

James contrasts the nature of judgment for the unbeliever with the believer.

- True believers show mercy (do not practice discrimination/favoritism) and will find that God's mercy annuls the condemnation they otherwise would have received.
- But unbelievers, the ones not showing mercy (who discriminate and show favoritism) will not find Divine mercy.

Anyone who speaks and acts in love/mercy—not just people who call themselves Christians—receive God's mercy.

## **F. Reflections**

1. We cannot follow Jesus and show favoritism or discriminate on the basis of class, race, gender, or any other culturally constructed standard.
2. We are not to show favoritism because it rejects God's standards, it kowtows to the domination powers of the world, and it doesn't display the law of love.
3. True believers show mercy and for that reason God is merciful to them.