

James / James 2:1–13

Introduction

About 1600 years ago, in the year 390, the emperor of the Roman Empire, Theodosius the Great, was involved in a terrible event in the Greek city of Thessalonica. Details are hard to come by but there was a disturbance in the city and it is believed that Theodosius ordered Roman soldiers to massacre some of the citizens.

By this point in time, Christianity was starting to take over the Roman Empire. Moreover, bishops of major cities could often serve as counsellors to the emperor. When Ambrose, the bishop of Milan heard what Theodosius had done, he confronted the emperor and demanded him to repentant or face the discipline of the church.

This is a pivotal moment in church history because even though Rome had been Christianized, it had not been Christian for very long. Perhaps the Theodosius would ignore the demand of the church and return Rome to its pagan past.

Ultimately, Theodosius submitted to the church in repentance setting a precedent for emperors to come.

This story is a wonderful example of a leader in the church *not* showing partiality. I don't think it is too far of a stretch to say that if you or I were in Ambrose's shoes, we might have been tempted to not confront the emperor. But Ambrose refused to allow the emperor's power sway him from doing what was right.

If [James 1](#) introduces the theme of “counting it all joy” in suffering, [James 2](#) confronts one of the primary ways Christians seek to avoid suffering: the sin of partiality.

Partiality is the main theme of the text and I will go through the passage by pointing out three commands from James:

1. In verses 1-4 James commands that Christians should not show partiality.

2. In verses 5-7 James reiterates that Christians should not follow the ways of the world.
3. In verses 8-13 James teaches Christians to fulfill the royal law.

Show No Partiality (v. 1-4)

Our text begins with James's straight forward command, "***My brothers, show now partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.***"

James is going to move into the topic of partiality, but before he does so he grounds his hearers in their connection to Jesus.

James says to show no partiality, but he emphasizes that you are to do this *by* holding on to Jesus. James *also* gives Jesus an important title here, "***The Lord of glory***".

James draws a connection between being impartial and the glory of Jesus. The reason for this is straight forward. Impartiality is a "Godlike" quality. God is impartial.

[Romans 2](#) teaches that God shows no partiality. [1 Pet 1](#) states that God judges impartially. Impartiality was a major theme of the Law. God commanded Israel to deal impartially with all. [Leviticus 19:15](#) sums it up well, "*You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.*"

In verses 2-3, James presents a scenario where a wealthy man ***wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into their assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in.*** In the scenario, James says that the rich person is welcomed and treated with honor while the poor man is shunned and ignored.

Remember the context of James. James writes to persecuted Christians. If a rich and powerful person walked into one of their churches, there would be a temptation to show partiality. You can imagine these Christians thinking, "This man might be able to help us against this persecution."

But James condemns such behavior. He says that in so doing you've ***become judges with evil thoughts.***

If the end of [James 1](#) taught that “*the anger of man doesn’t produce the righteousness of God*” the beginning of chapter 2 teaches “***The partiality of man does not produce the righteousness of God***”

By showing such partiality, a Christian shows that they don’t trust God to make things right. They would rather *take things into their own hands* and curry favor with the rich and powerful to fix their situation.

Its important for us to see *how* James applies the Law of Moses. The laws about partiality specifically applied to legal judgements. God’s people were forbidden from showing partiality in judging cases between the rich and poor.

James does here what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount. Neither James nor Jesus set aside the Law. However, they do interpret the Law and show the depths of its true meaning. James takes what the Law says about partiality in the courtroom and he applies it to the everyday life of Christians.

Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy all teach that it is sinful to show partiality in the courtroom. James shows that these laws also condemn partiality in the ways you greet, interact, and think about people.

The bar is high, which is why James says we must hold to Christ. We must hold firm in faith to Christ when we fail. Trusting in his grace to restore us. And we must hold firm to him in our efforts. Relying on his strength to help us to be impartial.

Don’t Follow the Ways of the World (vv. 5-7)

Chapter 1 concluded with James saying that followers of Jesus should not be stained by the ways of the world. Here, James shows that showing partiality is one of the ways they will be tempted to be like the world.

In verse 5 James reminds his audience that ***God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.***

James is not saying that God prefers the poor to the rich in some absolute way. Rather, James is showing that, in the church, the distinction between the rich and powerful and the poor and weak do not exist. The church is a new society.

The stratifications of power that characterized the Roman world around them do not exist in the church. The only status marker that exists in the church is that of baptism which dignifies all, small and great.

To show partiality to a rich guest in the church is to forget that you and everyone else in the church are heirs in God's kingdom. There are no riches that can compare to this or should sway you into partiality.

In verse 6 James expands on the problem. It isn't just that the leaders in the church are forgetting that the poor and the rich are both alike in the church. Rather, by showing partiality, James teaches that this dishonors the poor man. There is an interesting thing that James does here by using the phrase "the poor man". If you remember back to Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats in [Matt. 25:31-46](#), you'll remember that Jesus is the poor man that was either shunned by the wicked or embraced by the righteous.

By showing partiality to the rich, James says that Jesus is dishonored.

James continues to paint a bleak picture by shedding more light on who these rich and powerful men are in verses 6-7. They are the ones who are doing the oppressing and dragging them off into courts. They are the ones who are blaspheming the name of Jesus.

The rich men who come into their assemblies are likely those who are sent from Jerusalem to carry out the persecution. When these men are entering their assemblies, the leaders of the church are trying to curry favor with them. When they do this, they dishonor the poor in their midst and they dishonor Jesus.

For James, this is the way of the world and not the way of Jesus. These ways must be avoided in preference of another way. The way of the "royal law."

Fulfill the Royal Law (vv. 8-13)

In verses 8-9 James turns from his prohibition to his prescription. Rather than showing partiality, James wants you to "**fulfill the royal law**". And what is the royal law? Put simply, it is "**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**"

I quoted [Leviticus 19:15](#) above about the laws concerning partiality. Interestingly enough, only a few verses later in [Leviticus 19:18](#) is the command to "Love your

neighbor as yourself.” Both in James and in Leviticus, there is a connection between impartiality and loving one’s neighbor.

In these three sermons from James, I’ve tried to show the connection between royalty and maturity. James writes a lot about maturity and speaks of the “crown of life” and here the “royal law.” Rule is connected to maturity. Here, James shows the way to maturity. The way to maturity is through love. Specifically, love expressed in impartiality.

In [Luke 10](#) Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells the parable immediately after being asked the question, “And who is my neighbor?” One way to understand the parable is that it is a parable of partiality and impartiality. The priest and the levite show preference to themselves and not their neighbor in need, while the Samaritan shows no partiality, but loves his neighbor.

This background helps us understand verses 9-10. For James, the issue of impartiality is closely related to the command to love one’s neighbor. ***If you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.***

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was he answered by saying, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*” ([Matthew 22:37-40](#))

James shows, as Jesus did, that unless we wholly love God and our neighbor, we are liable of breaking the whole law. Failing to be impartial makes one guilty of the whole law. For the Law and prophets depend upon loving your neighbor.

This also helps us make sense of verse 11. James brings up the sins of adultery and murder. Remember how Jesus spoke of adultery and murder in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus showed that the heart of adultery is lust and the heart of murder is anger.

Recall that last week James was very intent on addressing the sin of anger and James is closing the loop by bringing it up again here. The nature of sin is to drive toward extremes. Some of James’ hearers wanted to kill their persecutors. Others wanted to flatter them. James condemns both approaches.

James offers the corrective, ***speaking and acting as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgement is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgement.*** Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” and James reminds us of this here.

God’s people are to be marked out as a community of mercy and grace. Such a community has no place for partiality or anger. God is judge and his people are to show forth this justice in the way they treat one another and their persecutors.

As mercy has triumphed over judgement in our own lives, let it triumph in the way we walk with one another.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!