

Bible Fellowship Teaching Plan for James 2:1-13 (October 4, 2026)
Partiality and the Royal Law

Central Truth: Authentic faith refuses to measure people by worldly standards. Because we have received God's impartial grace and mercy through Christ, we are called to treat others without partiality and to live according to the "royal law": "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Key Passage (verse 1): "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."

Opening Question: When you walk into a room full of people, whom do you notice first, and what might your answer reveal about what you value? You might think about whom you hope will notice you, whom you naturally want to talk with, whom you tend to avoid, whom you assume will be interesting or useful, whom you might overlook--then ask, "What does this say about my heart?"

Background: James continues his practical examination of authentic Christian faith. In the first chapter, he challenged believers to respond to God's Word by becoming doers, not merely hearers. Now, in James 2:1-13, he exposes another evidence of whether God's Word has truly transformed us: how we value and treat other people.

Lesson Objectives

- 1) Explain what the Bible means when we're commanded not to practice partiality.
- 2) Identify worldly standards (wealth, appearance, status, influence, or social position) that can cause us to assign different values to people.
- 3) Explain why James considers partiality inconsistent with genuine faith in Jesus Christ.

- 4) Understand that all people stand on equal ground before God and are equally in need of His grace and salvation.
- 5) Explain the “royal law”—“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”—and how it applies to relationships with people whom we might overlook or favor.
- 6) Understand the connection between receiving God's mercy and extending mercy to others.
- 7) Examine personal attitudes and behaviors for evidence of partiality.
- 8) Apply James's teaching by intentionally treating others with the same mercy, dignity, honor, and love that Christ has shown us.

I. Genuine Faith Shows No Partiality (1-4)

- A. James begins with a direct command: “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”
- B. He then gives a vivid example of two people entering a worship service:
 1. A wealthy man wearing expensive clothing and gold rings
 2. A poor man wearing shabby clothing
 3. The congregation gives the wealthy man special attention and the best seat while treating the poor man as though he is less worthy of consideration.
- C. James says that such behavior reveals something much deeper than bad manners. They have become “judges with evil thoughts.”
- D. The problem is not recognizing differences between people. The problem is assigning different worth to people because of those differences.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What distinction does James make between ordinary preferences and sinful partiality?

- 2) Why would wealth, clothing, or social status influence the way people are treated?
- 3) What does favoritism reveal about the values of the person showing it?
- 4) Why does James call those who practice partiality “judges with evil thoughts”?
- 5) What modern equivalents might we substitute for James's wealthy and poorly dressed visitors?
- 6) How might partiality appear in a church without anyone actually intending to be unkind?

Questions for Personal Reflection

- 1) Do I unconsciously give greater attention to people who are wealthy, attractive, influential, educated, or socially prominent?
- 2) Are there people I tend to overlook because I don't think they have much to offer me?
- 3) Whom might I be tempted to avoid or dismiss?
- 4) Do my actions communicate that some people are more valuable than others?

II. God Assigns Value Differently Than the World (5-7)

- A. James asks: “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?” James is not teaching that poverty itself saves a person or that wealth itself is sinful. The lesson is that worldly wealth is not a measure of spiritual worth, and poverty avoids some of the temptations faced by the wealthy.
- B. The congregation had reversed God's values. They were honoring the wealthy because of what the wealthy could apparently offer them while dishonoring the poor.
- C. Yet at the foot of the cross, the distinction disappears: both rich and poor need Christ, both stand before God in need of grace, and both come to God through faith.

D. James reminds his readers that their own salvation is evidence of God's impartial grace.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What does James mean by being “rich in faith”?
- 2) Why can worldly possessions never be a reliable measure of someone's spiritual condition?
- 3) Why might wealth become a spiritual temptation?
- 4) How does the gospel change the way we evaluate someone's worth?
- 5) What does it mean to say that the ground is level at the foot of the cross?
- 6) How should remembering our own dependence upon grace affect the way we treat others?

Questions for Personal Reflection

- 1) How do I associate someone's possessions or circumstances with their worth?
- 2) Do I admire people primarily because of what they have accomplished or possess?
- 3) Have I forgotten how completely dependent I am upon God's grace?
- 4) When I look at another person, do I see someone made in God's image and in need of His grace?

III. Partiality Breaks the Royal Law (8-11)

- A. The governing principle to avoid partiality is the Royal Law: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
- B. He calls this the “royal law” because it’s a crowning principle that summarizes the believer's responsibility toward others (see Matthew 22:40 and Galatians 5:14)
- C. The problem with partiality becomes clear: we cannot genuinely love our neighbor as ourselves while deliberately treating some neighbors as more

valuable than others. If we honor someone because of wealth while neglecting someone because of poverty, our treatment is determined by worldly motives rather than love.

D. James then makes another important point: God's law cannot be treated as a menu from which we select our favorite commands. Breaking one command makes us a transgressor of the entire law.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why does James call “love your neighbor as yourself” the royal law?
- 2) How does partiality violate the command to love our neighbor?
- 3) Why can't we justify partiality simply because we obey many other biblical commands?
- 5) What happens when we begin choosing which biblical commands we will obey based on our personal preferences?
- 6) How does loving our neighbor require more than simply avoiding obvious mistreatment?

Questions for Personal Reflection

- 1) Do I love people equally, or do I give different levels of respect based on what they can offer me?
- 2) Is there a biblical command I find easy to obey while resisting another that challenges my preferences?
- 3) What would “love your neighbor as yourself” look like in one of my current relationships?

IV. Live by the Law of Liberty by Showing Mercy (12-13)

A. James concludes: “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.”

B. The law of liberty is the new-life principle of the gospel written on the believer's heart. It is not an external compulsion, but an internal desire.

- C. Because Christ has freed us from sin, we are now free and motivated to live in a way that honors Him.
- D. James then applies this specifically to mercy: “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”
- E. The point is not that showing mercy earns God's salvation; instead, mercy is evidence of a heart that has genuinely understood and received God's mercy.
- F. The gospel changes the way we see others because Christ showed mercy to us when we had nothing with which to earn His acceptance.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What does James mean by the “law of liberty” and how are we obligated to obey this law?
- 2) How is obedience to Christ connected with genuine freedom?
- 3) Why should people who have received God's mercy become people who show mercy?
- 4) What does James mean by “mercy triumphs over judgment”?
- 5) How does the gospel change our tendency to judge people according to personal preferences?
- 6) What is the difference between showing mercy and excusing sin?

Questions for Personal Reflection

- 1) How has God's mercy toward me changed the way I treat others?
- 2) Is there someone from whom I am withholding mercy?
- 3) Do I tend to judge people according to their appearance, circumstances, behavior, or usefulness to me?
- 4) What would it look like this week to move toward someone with the mercy that I’ve received from the Lord Jesus Christ?
- 5) When I have a choice between judgment and mercy, which one is more characteristic of my response?

V. Application: See Everyone Through the Lens of Christ's Mercy

- A. The lesson ultimately points beyond the behavior itself to the gospel. God did not evaluate us according to our worthiness before offering us His salvation. We came to Christ because of grace. Our standing before God rests on Christ's finished work rather than on our accomplishments or social position.
- B. Therefore, James's challenge is not simply: "Try harder to treat everybody equally." It is: "Remember the mercy you have received from Christ, and allow that mercy to reshape how you see and treat others."
- C. When we regard others as people for whom Christ died, worldly distinctions begin to lose their power over our relationships.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is remembering God's mercy more powerful than simply trying harder not to show favoritism?
- 2) How does the cross provide the ultimate picture of God's impartial grace?
- 3) What happens when our motivation shifts from "What can this person do for me?" to "How can I show Christ's love to this person?"
- 4) How might our church or Bible Fellowship class look different if everyone intentionally practiced this principle?
- 5) What practical opportunities do we have to show mercy to people who are often overlooked?

Questions for Personal Reflection

- 1) Am I treating others according to the world's standards, or through the lens of the mercy Christ has shown me?
- 2) Who is someone I can intentionally welcome, encourage, serve, or just listen to this week?

Summary: James 2:1–13 confronts a subtle but deeply significant problem: partiality. We may think of favoritism as simply giving someone preferential treatment, but James reveals that it is ultimately a heart issue. It occurs when we allow worldly standards (wealth, appearance, status, influence, personality, usefulness, etc.) to determine how we value and treat people. James reminds us that:

- Authentic faith shows no partiality.
- God's values are different from the world's values.
- Partiality violates God's law of love.
- Believers are to live according to the law of liberty.
- Those who have received God's mercy should increasingly become people who show mercy.

At the foot of the cross, worldly distinctions do not determine our standing before God. All have sinned, all need grace, and salvation comes through Christ. As a result, the question isn't just, "Do I show favoritism?" but "What standards am I using to determine the value of the people around me?"

James calls us to replace the world's measuring system with the royal law of love and to allow the mercy we have received from Christ to become visible in the way we treat others.

Closing Challenge

This week, intentionally notice the people you might normally overlook. Instead of thinking about what they can do for you, ask: "How can I show this person the mercy and love of Jesus Christ?"

May mercy rather than judgment triumph in your life today and may it be seen in your interactions with others this week.

Sunday School Lesson for October 4, 2026
James 2:1-13

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this first Sunday in October, we're well into a new series of lessons in the challenging letter of James. Throughout our previous study of the gospel of John, we heard the Lord Jesus call His disciples to follow Him. In this brief letter, James shows us exactly how we are to follow Jesus.

In just the first chapter of this letter, James has probably written something that's challenged the way you see the Word of God and yourself as you've considered his illustration of the truth of the God's Word as a mirror that shows you where you're not living up to the standard of righteousness that the Lord expects of those who are, as James was, an authentic servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. I hope this hasn't discouraged you, because James doesn't expose sin in our lives so that we would turn away from the Lord either in our defense or in defiance, but that we would recognize that He is diligently at work in us so that that we would be "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

In today's lesson from the first thirteen verses of the second chapter, James will confront us with our preferences--preferences that reveal--not an attitude and a disposition toward spiritual discernment, by preferences that reveal something much darker and, in fact, sinful.

Let me begin with what could be seen as a controversial idea. We all have our preferences when it comes to Christian music. Some like the old hymns, some like the contemporary praise songs, while some like other categories of music that are quite different from our American form of Christian worship, like Gregorian chants or African praise song. Some people are pretty set in what they like and don't like. They've found a particular type of song, or perhaps a particular songwriter, that they like more than any other. Now,

there's nothing wrong with having those preferences, as long as the theology is sound and the music glorifies God.

The problem comes when someone who is accustomed to one style of music hears a different style of music and thinks, "I really don't like how that sounds." It's not that he or she has found a problem with the theology or the message in the song, but the style of music through which the message is conveyed.

If this person's not careful, the difference between what he or she likes and doesn't like turns into a biased preference, and that biased preference turns into a harsh evaluation. If that attitude becomes unchecked, it's not long before that harsh evaluation becomes a cruel judgment. Instead of asking whether Christ is being faithfully proclaimed through a particular song, that person will start asking whether it matches what he or she likes. From there, this person will begin to assume that certain voices have more to offer than others, and that other voices should be silenced. And that will change how the person listens. By then, he or she becomes--at best--less receptive. This person assumes he or she knows better than anyone else about which music is "right" and which music is "wrong."

It may be just a slight shift at first, but it can have ripple effects throughout your life, because you'll lean towards some people and pull away from others. You'll give weight to certain voices and withhold it from others without even recognizing it. If unchecked, you'll soon be assigning value based solely on what you like and what you don't like. Sadly, we all make distinctions like this, often without even realizing it.

So, what does James have to say about our preferences? By way of an outline, we could say that authentic faith shows no partiality--verses one through four--, God assigns value differently than the world--verses five through seven--, partiality breaks God's law--verses eight through eleven--, and real faith shows mercy--verses twelve and thirteen.

Without any introduction, without any background preparation for the direct message he has for us in these verses, James simply lays it out for us in the first verse: “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”

Some Bible commentators see this statement as a question: “Do you, in showing favoritism, hold to the faith of our Lord?” where treating people differently on the basis of worldly appraisals and assessments calls into question whether such a person is truly a believer.

Why do you think James finds it necessary to address this so early in his letter? We don’t know of a situation among the people he was writing to that may have prompted him to write this, but this is a common issue that we all face in one way or another. The opening illustration of music styles is minor compared to other areas of our lives.

The problem is that we have a very bothersome problem of assigning value according to our own standards rather than recognizing the standard God places on things and other people. We notice status, appearance, personality, influence, what kind of house or neighborhood a person lives in, what kind of car or truck a person drives--and one that puzzles me to no end--what kind of shoes people wear. We tend to gravitate toward those who make us feel important, accepted, or comfortable while quietly overlooking others. Without realizing it, we begin making sinful distinctions based on worldly standards.

James pulls back the cover on that tendency. He exposes that inclination and shows us what it really is. The kind of favoritism he’s addressing is more than bad manners or an awkward social habit but a heart that measures people according to the values of the world rather than the mercy of God. Showing partiality isn’t an isolated mistake--it exposes the same heart problem every sin reveals. Left to ourselves, we do not naturally love God above all else or love our neighbors as ourselves.

So, think about the last time you walked into a room full of people--the place where you work, a restaurant, a classroom, a Bible Fellowship class, or a worship service. What did you look for or look at first? Whom did you hope would notice you? Whom did you see that you wanted to avoid? Now, ask yourself, "What might that reveal about my heart?"

As we've seen with other issues James has led us to see, he isn't leaving us to lose hope over our condition, when he exposes our partiality. He's helping us see where we still need the transforming grace of Christ. His ideal for the life of every believer is that he or she would show mercy as God shows mercy.

Remember that James is writing to a predominately Jewish audience who knew how God looked at inappropriate favoritism. For example, in Leviticus, chapter nineteen, verse fifteen, the Lord says, "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." Even in our New Testaments, Paul and Peter both tell us that God doesn't show partiality--Romans, chapter two, verse eleven, and Acts, chapter ten, verse 34.

So, James begins by appealing to us as brothers--people just like he is who have been saved by God Who shows no partiality when it comes to our faith--and it's a really good thing He sees us this way, or some of us--myself included--would be in a lot of trouble. We've all been recipients of the impartial salvation Christ offers. Every genuine follower of the Lord Jesus Christ can tell of a time when he or she knelt before the Lord, confessed his or her rejection of His love, asked for His forgiveness, pledged his or her life to Him, and found that he or she was adopted as His child so that we are now heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ--all because of God's impartial grace. And because God has dealt with us impartially, we ought to treat others the same.

James elevates that thought when he speaks of Jesus as "the Lord of Glory." He is Lord--our Master, our Owner, our Sovereign--to Whom all our

allegiance is due and the One we trust to show us how to value others because of the way He showed how He valued us. As our faith is in the Lord Jesus Who shared in the eternal glory of God here on earth and returned to be reunited in that glory, we should never place our confidence in anything else--certainly not in the things that the world values and the way the world places value on those things.

In mentioning the glory--the shekinah glory of God--that would have been a very familiar image for his Jewish readers who as they recalled the brilliant light that shone from between the cherubim over the mercy seat in the holiest place in the Temple and manifested the divine presence of God, James gives us his own version of the opening words of John's gospel where John wrote, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

One consequence of our faith in Jesus--the Lord of God's glory--is that the great privileges we have as His authentic followers completely overshadows any artificial difference we might see in others. As a result, there's no place in the life of an authentic believer for the reverence for wealth, position, fame, influence, or any other thing the world gives value to above Christ, especially if it comes with a corresponding disregard of the poor, which is the focus of his illustration in verses two through four.

Here's the scenario he wants us to consider: "If a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 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,' have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" In drawing this picture for us, James seems to have been aware that such things were a common occurrence that needed to be addressed.

So, a worship service is about to begin, and in walks this man who's well-dressed, wears expensive jewelry, and gives every indication that he was a man of means. Gold rings were common ornaments of the rich, but, in this case, the wearing of a gold ring was intended to draw attention to the wealth this man possessed. The text actually reads that he was wearing "rings"--not just one. Joel Gregory writes, "Such a visitor veritably dripped gold from his fingers; In ancient cultures, such rings could sometimes be rented in order that the person might give the appearance of affluence. In ancient Greek culture, to wear such a ring was the equivalent of having a hillside mansion in the most elite section of the city."

This man also wore an elegant, luxurious, shining garment. The words refer to "bright" or "shining apparel" as the garments worn by the angel who appeared to Cornelius in Acts, chapter ten, verse thirty. Such clothing was often made with Tyrian purple and crimson cloth embroidered with gold. This man apparently meant to distinguish himself above others who didn't wear the same clothes as he could afford.

Then there's another person who walks into the church service. In stark contrast to the rich man who proudly displays his prominence, this man is poor, dressed in dirty or shabby clothing--the King James Version reads, "vile raiment." It's apparent that he's one of society's outcasts.

Now, James says, what if you pay special attention to the one who's wearing a fine, gold ring and sporting fine clothes; what if you give him the best seat in the house; what if you introduce him to the pastor and welcome him in front of the congregation? What if you go "all-out" for this rich guy but don't pay any attention to the poor man?

Rather than give the poor man a good seat, you make him stand up in the back or sit on the floor, lest he get one of the velvet pew cushions dirty. What if you seat him away from everybody else, lest his body odor offend one of the church's leading ladies? If you treat a rich man one way and a poor man

another way, James says, “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves? Have you not become judges with evil motives?”

The rich man is neither the better nor the worse for his fine clothes, and the poor man neither the better nor the worse for his shabby clothes. The mistake James’ readers were making / lay in thinking that such distinctions had something to do with the practice of their faith, and certain individuals ought to be honored / or / disparaged in public worship.

The word that we have translated “made distinctions” is the same word that James used back in the sixth and eighth verses of the first chapter when he challenged those who carried on a running debate in their minds, caught between two opinions--those double-minded persons who said one thing and did something else. To show partiality was evidence of placing higher value on society’s standards than on God’s standards.

So, James asks the piercing question, “have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” “Are you not divided in your own minds--saying that you follow the Lord Jesus Christ Who did not view others with partiality, but doing the exact opposite by valuing one over the other, clear for everyone to see in the very different way you treat them?” They’re not single-hearted believers in the Lord Jesus, but double-minded doubters, like those James wrote about in verses six and seven of the first chapter who were trying to make the best of both worlds, trying to serve God and the world.

Not only were they half-hearted in following God’s instructions for dealing with others, they had gone beyond that to become judges of who was worthy of honor and who was not. They had become unjust judges, giving greater consideration to the person of wealth than the person of poverty, while forgetting that both were persons with apparently equal spiritual needs.

James isn’t simply correcting poor social etiquette. He’s exposing a heart that assigns value according to human standards rather than God’s. He’s

reminding us that partiality begins long before it becomes visible. It starts with the judgments we make in our hearts. To confess faith in the glorious Lord Jesus while showing partiality is to live as though the world's way of measuring people still governs our hearts. That changes only when genuine faith begins to see others through the same gracious lens by which Christ sees us.

In verses five through nine, James shows us how to correct this sinful partiality that casts doubt on the authenticity of our faith, beginning with this question: "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?" Genuine followers of Christ who lack the resources the world provides can rejoice because they've been adopted as children of God. They're heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, clothed in the very righteousness of Christ Himself, possessing an eternal inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, reserved in heaven for them and even now enjoying His justifying, pardoning, and sanctifying grace; and nothing can separate them from the love which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

On the other hand, the Lord Jesus told His hearers that it was hard for a **rich** person to enter the kingdom of God--Luke, chapter eighteen, verses 24 and 25--because those who are wealthy by the standards of the world--and yes, you're incredibly rich compared to the two-thirds of the world that lives in poverty--it's hard for many in first-world countries to enter the kingdom of God because we tend to find security in our riches which makes it appear unnecessary to trust God.

The rich man didn't deserve the special attention he received at the expense of the poor man, and the poor man may actually have been more entitled to be esteemed than the rich man. But God has chosen the poor of this world, not only the physically poor who may more easily recognize their

spiritual poverty, but anyone who recognizes that, apart from Christ alone, there is no salvation.

Then James makes it practical by having his readers compare the treatment they give to the poor and the treatment they receive from the rich. They dishonor the poor and the rich dishonor them. Aren't the rich the ones, he says, those "who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?" And then asks, "Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?"

Both men entered that imaginary sanctuary--that place that God had sanctified by receiving all people without prejudice or bias and that the members of the congregation had desecrated by rejecting some because of their prejudice and bias. Both the rich man and the poor man stood on level ground at the foot of the cross, the souls of both were in need of salvation, and God saw no fundamental difference between the two; but the people in that congregation distinguished between the two in a way that God never does.

As a result, James says, "You have dishonored the poor man." It's the poor man, James says, who relates to you better than the rich man, because the rich man lords his power over you, he drags you before the judges, he disregards and denies the spiritual power of Jesus Christ. "Folks," James says, "what you have done is that you've chosen to honor the rich man, not because of his need of Christ, but for your desire for worldly recognition, and this is as wrong as wrong can be." This is not belief, but disbelief, in action.

We don't know for sure what James was referring to in asking his readers if the rich weren't the very ones who were taking them to court and blaspheming the Name of Christ. These rich oppressors were certainly not believers, and he may well have been referring to the rich Sadducees who, at the particular time in Israel's history when James was writing, were among the worst oppressors of poorer Jews and who zealously persecuted the followers of Jesus, taking them before Roman courts to be tried and punished. But they

were rich, and there seems to have been those among the believers to whom James is writing who somehow thought they deserved to be honored.

Whatever the case, one commentator writes, “In such a state of society the mere possession of wealth certainly established no claims upon the reverence of a Christian congregation; and the fawning upon rich people, degrading and unchristian at all times, would seem to St. James to be specially perilous and distressing then.” “His argument, therefore, amounts to this, that the practice of honoring the rich for their riches (quite independently of any dishonor done to the poor) is doubly reprehensible. It involves the meanness of flattering their own oppressors, and the wickedness of reverencing those who blaspheme Christ. It is a servile surrender of their own rights, and base disloyalty to their Lord.”

Now, don't misunderstand what James is saying here. He's not saying that the poor man is promised salvation because he's poor or that his poverty in any way makes him more worthy of salvation. This is not the case, any more than the wealth of the rich man is a sin. If it seems as if God has preferred the poor over the rich, it's because the poor man has fewer temptations--he's spared the danger of trusting in riches which is a terrible snare to the wealthy--and he's more likely to respond to God's offer of grace because his needs are so much greater. Even so, opportunities are not virtues, and poverty is not salvation.

How do we correct this disbelief and free ourselves from this partiality? By fulfilling what James calls in verse eight the royal law: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It's a royal law in that it's more encompassing than other laws--a crowning moral principle, if you will--, being one of the two laws upon which hang the Law and the prophets as Jesus said in Matthew, chapter 22, verse forty, and Paul reminds the believers in Galatia--chapter five, verse fourteen--, that “the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Loving your neighbor as yourself demands that you won't love one type of neighbor more than another. If you keep that royal law, James says "you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." If you love the rich man as you would love yourself and treat him accordingly, you do well; however, if the attention, respect, honor you give to the rich man is determined by worldly motives, if you treat the rich man well simply because he's rich and you wish to gain favor with him and then treat the poor man harshly or with neglect because he can't do anything for you, then you've broken the Law of God that forbids respect of some persons and not others.

It doesn't matter if you've obeyed nine-tenths of the law. That breaking of the law makes you guilty of transgressing the entirety of the law, and James offers an illustration in verse eleven: "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." As a result, such a person would be identified as a transgressor of the law, because he picked and chose which neighbors to respect and treat kindly and which to treat in the opposite way. Here again, James' Jewish readers would have known that this was all too true.

One commentator writes, "Such keeping of the law is in its essence, not obedience, but disobedience. He who follows honesty only because honesty is the best policy is not an honest man, and he who obeys the law only because obedience suits him is not an obedient man. There is no serving God with reservations. However small the reservation may be, it [corrupts] all the rest. In order to 'fulfill the law' ... we must keep [all of it], independently of our own likes and dislikes."

And the way to fix all of that, James says in verse twelve, is to "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty." Those who have experienced God's mercy are obligated to live as people shaped by that

mercy. James once again references this “law of liberty” that we were first introduced to in verse 25 of the first chapter.

This law of liberty is the New Testament principle of the new life that comes from the gospel of Jesus Christ that frees us from the restraints of the Law of Moses as it fulfills the Mosaic Law. The Law of Moses had commanded behavior and described the punishments for failure to obey. The law of liberty, on the other hand, is the law that the Lord spoke of through Jeremiah in chapter 31, verse 33, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” The law of liberty doesn’t operate on the basis of external compulsion but internal desire. Because of what Jesus Christ has done for us in delivering us from the penalty and the power of sin, freeing us from sin and death, and making possible a glorious inheritance in heaven and peace with God today, we long to serve and honor Him, not wanting anything to interfere with our relationship with Him. We follow and we seek to do His will--not out of fear--but our all-surpassing desire to do what will bring glory to His Name.

James may have had the Lord Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in mind--Matthew, chapter five, verse seventeen, when He said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them,” and then went on to challenge them to consider the attitude of their hearts; for example, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Or perhaps he was recalling the Lord’s words to the Jews who had believed in him--John, chapter eight, verse 31: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The Word of Christ brings freedom, but only for those who abide in His Word--obey His word, allowing His Word to become, as it were, a law to our hearts that, through our loving obedience, brings our actions and attitudes into

alignment with His will, thereby freeing us to become everything He designed and desires us to be. “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

This law of liberty is the standard by which we are to compare our speech and our actions: our speech in relation to the bridling of our tongue that James spoke about in verse 26 of the previous chapter and that he has more to say in the coming verses, and our actions in relation to showing partiality; our response to temptation; being “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; caring for widows and orphans, keeping oneself unstained from the world, and many other aspects of our lives that we’ll hear more about as well.

In the immediate context, James would have us apply this law of liberty to our treatment of others, perhaps once again taking his cue from the Sermon on the Mount--Matthew, chapter five, verse seven: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” James begins verse thirteen with the denial of mercy: “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.” This is the message of the parable of the unmerciful servant whose debt was forgiven but had a fellow servant who owed him money thrown into prison. When the king who had forgiven the man his debt heard what had happened, he had him delivered to the jailers until he could pay all his debt. The application Jesus made to this parable was this: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

And there’s also the story from Matthew, chapter twelve, where the Pharisees accuse Jesus’ disciples of doing that which was not lawful on the Sabbath as they picked grain to eat as they walked through a grainfield. Jesus gave them two lessons from scripture and concluded by saying, “if you had known what this means, I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,”--quoting from Hosea, chapter six, verse six--“you would not have condemned the guiltless.”

In the illustration of the rich man and the poor man, those in the congregation had judged the poor man of being unworthy of enjoying the fine reception the rich man received. Their judgment was wrong, not only because they had valued one over the other based on appearance alone, but because they had denied mercy to the poor man. In the Day of Judgment, those who have failed to show mercy will receive no mercy, while those who have been merciful to others--not judging them based on personal preference, but seeing them as individuals created in the image and likeness of God and those for whom Christ died--they will receive mercy.

The qualities of mercy and justice would appear to be in conflict, but mercy prevails. It's what we find in the gospel: God doesn't play favorites--we all deserve God's wrath, "for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Justice demands that the sinner should be condemned: "The wages of sin is death," but mercy pleads that we may be saved--and mercy prevails: "But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," as "Mercy triumphs over judgment." In chapter four, verse eight of John's first letter, he reminds us "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God."

Cindi Murphy writes, "Those who have received God's mercy increasingly become people marked by mercy. James is not saying we earn God's favor by showing compassion. He is showing that mercy is the natural fruit of a heart that has truly grasped the mercy it has already received. The gospel frees us from measuring others by our own standards because we know our own standing before God rests entirely on his grace."

"Partiality is one of the ways our hearts sort people. We notice status, appearance, personality, influence, and even whether someone approaches life or Scripture the way we do. Then, almost without realizing it, we begin deciding who deserves our attention and who probably doesn't have much to offer us." If God evaluated us the way we often evaluate others, none of us would have any hope.

“Jesus didn’t wait for us to become impressive or useful before moving toward us. He welcomed the overlooked, touched the unclean, ate with sinners, and showed mercy to people who could offer him nothing in return. Then, at the cross, he bore the judgment we deserved. Because of Christ, mercy triumphs over judgment for everyone who belongs to him.”

And that changes how we look at people wherever we go.

“We no longer have to sort people according to what they might offer us, because our own place in God’s family was given to us entirely by grace. Our standing before God doesn’t rise and fall with how well we’ve loved others. It rests on the finished work of Christ.”

“So, when James reveals partiality in our hearts, he isn’t calling us to prove that we deserve God’s acceptance. He is reminding us that we never deserved it--and that Christ showed us mercy anyway. Now we are free to move toward others with the same mercy we have already received.”

From the Word of the Lord through James today, we’ve seen that there’s absolutely no place for unrighteous partiality within our hearts. God doesn’t play favorites between individuals according to wealth, social status, race, nationality, gender, or any other category that human judgment might place individuals in, and neither should we. The ground is level at the foot of the cross, all stand equally judged and in need of salvation, and all come to Christ in the same way--by faith alone.

Whenever the motivation for the things we do--even the good things we do--is self-centered rather than God-centered, we’ve lost our ability to judge according to His standard--the “royal law” that James speaks of: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” So regard others as those for whom Christ died, and show them the same regard, the same honor, the same sacrificial love that our Lord showed when He took upon Himself your sin and my sin.

Finally, since Christ has set you free, you don’t have to look at others or judge others the way the world does. Treat others and minister to others and

show mercy to others and love others with the mercy and love of the Lord Jesus Christ. “Judgment will be merciless to those who show no mercy; however, mercy triumphs over judgment.” May mercy rather than judgment triumph in your life today and may it be clearly seen in your interactions with others this week.

Next week, we move on to the central theme of this letter in verses fourteen through 26 where James lays out the true test of authentic faith in those well-known words, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

As always, as it’s still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

The resources for this lesson include James: Christianity in Real Shoe Leather by Joel Gregory; Planting Roots unpublished manuscript, James: Rooted in Christ, by Cindi Murphy; The Epistle of St. James: The Greek Text with Introduction and Comments, by Joseph B. Mayor; Notes on the Bible by Albert Barnes (1834), text courtesy of Internet Sacred Texts Archive; The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, text courtesy of BibleSupport.com; The Expositor’s Bible, text courtesy of BibleSupport.com; The Expositor’s Greek Testament - Nicoll, Text Courtesy of BibleSupport.com; Exposition of the Entire Bible by John Gill (1746-63), text courtesy of Internet Sacred Texts Archive; ICC New Testament commentary on selected books, Text Courtesy of BibleSupport.com; Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal, and Homiletical (John Peter Lange) text courtesy of BibleSupport.com; Expositions Of Holy Scripture, Alexander MacLaren, text courtesy of BibleSupport.com; and The Pulpit Commentary, Electronic Database, copyright © 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2010 by BibleSoft, inc.

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