

## **Series James**

### **This Message Faith Without Impartial Love is Dead**

“Don’t show favoritism. Favoritism is not compatible with faith”

### **Scripture James 2:1-13**

We are far enough into this letter written by James that we can recognize some characteristics of his style of writing. He was an ethnic Jew writing to fellow Jews, and therefore he wrote in the style of a typical Jewish writer, which is to say that his thoughts were expressed in direct, pointed, and brief phrases. One evidence of this is the many “imperatives” in the text. “Imperatives” are “commands,” such as “Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials,” and “Don’t be deceived,” and “Do not merely listen to the word; do what it says.” There is one imperative for about every three verses of the letter.

In typical Jewish fashion, there are many figures of speech and analogies. In chapter 1 James wrote, “He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” In the message last week James compared the believer who does not do what God’s word commands to “the man who looks at his face in a mirror, and then immediately forgets what he looks like.”

Thoughts expressed in one chapter are brought up again in another part of the text. This Jewish “cyclical” style of addressing topics is sometimes frustrating for Westerners who tend to be more “linear” and “organized” in how ideas are put together. For example, “the use of one’s tongue” is mentioned at the end of chapter 1. In chapter 3 the use of the tongue is discussed at length. In chapter 4 subjects such as “slander, boasting, and bragging” are condemned, and in chapter 5 there is teaching against “grumbling” and instructions about prayer. This “cyclical” style was used by the Jewish rabbis of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and so was not unfamiliar to the readers of James’ letter.

James included in his writing many allusions to the Old Testament and to several Old Testament characters, including Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah. These references were appropriate because the recipients of the letter were familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures.

It was James' desire to instruct and encourage Jews who had placed their faith in Jesus and subsequently been persecuted and forced to relocate outside of Judea. As we have stated previously, James wanted these Jewish believers to be spiritually mature. James could connect with these scattered believers because his ethnic background was the same as theirs, and he could communicate with them in terms that they could easily understand.

In the passage we thought about last week, James emphasized the importance of putting spiritual truth into practice. This principle is emphasized throughout the letter. The key verse for our study is chapter 2, verse 17, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." Various aspects of this principle appear in this letter as James applies the Word of truth to specific dimensions in the life of the believer. We have already covered two of the topics, "Faith Without Perseverance is Dead" and "Faith Without Obedience is Dead." Today we will think about the next topic, "Faith Without Impartial Love and Mercy is Dead."

### **Read James 2:1-13**

This passage begins with another personal appeal, "My brothers," and then the readers are reminded of the faith they had placed in "the glorious Lord Jesus Christ." The word translated "believers" refers to people who "hold and maintain faith," a not too subtle way of suggesting that the readers needed to hold on more tightly to their relationship with Jesus.

In the verses which follow this opening statement, James applied this subject of faith to the behavior of the believers toward one another. If they were to show partiality toward one another because some among their number were wealthier than others, their behavior would be a contradiction of their faith. The implication was that some of the believers were acting inappropriately, and thereby demonstrating that they did not know the value of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Scripture is full of reminders that a proper view of Christ requires a proper view of others. That's the big lesson in this passage. Last week the message concluded with the statement: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is to look after orphans and widows in their distress." James had used that description as a kind of summary of God's concern for individuals who were powerless and defenseless. In the Old Testament, looking after others was proof of obedience to the ways of God.

Impartiality and non-discrimination were part of the same standard of justice that exhorted the Old Testament Jews to "look after orphans and widows in their distress." Compassion and non-discrimination were both topics addressed in the Old Testament, and therefore familiar to the Jews.

The discussion of partiality began with a blunt command: "Don't show favoritism." In the Greek language, this command was stated in the form which required the readers to stop doing what they were doing. The command had the force of "stop showing favoritism," — "stop that behavior." That some of the believers were showing favoritism is clear from verse 6, which reads, "But you have insulted the poor."

James wanted his readers to understand that actions showing partiality toward certain individuals were inconsistent with their faith "in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." Although they were believers, their actions were not compatible with the truth they professed to believe.

The Greek word translated "show partiality" means to judge on the basis of some external or superficial factor. It could be the color of a person's skin, the kind of clothes he wears, the sort of academic credentials he has earned, or his economic status. Prejudice has many forms. *[See #1 Additional Information at end of message]*

In verses 2 through 4 James gives a hypothetical illustration: "Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes." In sharp contrast is the "poor man (such as a beggar) with shabby/filthy clothes." If the rich man is given preferential treatment and ushered to "a good seat" while "the poor man" is abruptly told to "stand aside" in some out-of-the-way place, then, wrote James, this would be discrimination, and the discrimination would be evidence of a darker attitude of "evil thoughts."

For the believer, the behavior in verses 2 and 3 was uncalled for and un-Christ-like. There is an interesting play on words in verse 4, a kind of Jewish humor. The words translated "discriminated" (*diekrithete*) and "judges" (*kritai*) are formed on the same root. Hence, in discriminating between the two men, the readers were making unjust and evil judgments. *[See #2 Additional Information at end of message]*

We don't know how the believers were showing discrimination. It is possible that there were some wealthy Jews who came to the congregational worship meetings. It is possible that some of the destitute Jewish believers were cozying up to the more prosperous Jews in the hopes of obtaining special favors. Whatever the situation might have been, by showing partiality to wealthy individuals, the believers were putting more of their confidence in worldly behaviors and resources than in Christ. They were acting like worldly minded people who were working all the angles for selfish gain. Such actions were morally unsuited to believers who professed faith in Jesus Christ.

In verses 5 through 13 James presented three very important logical arguments that his readers needed to think about. The importance is brought out by James' introductory plea: "Listen, my dear brothers."

The first argument related to the economic status of the members of the Church in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. For the most part, membership in the early Church comprised those who were "poor in the eyes of the world." The message of hope in the gospel had special appeal to slaves and indentured servants. They were people without resources and legal rights. The gospel appealed to women because they were essentially second-class citizens. Undoubtedly many of the believers had lost property and assets because of persecution and their flight to outlying regions. There were logical reasons why the early Church was made up of those who were "poor in the eyes of the world." On the other hand, those who were wealthy and privileged were inclined to be self-sufficient and hence the gospel had limited appeal to them.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, stated: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (*Luke 6:20*). He was referring to individuals who had no resources except hope. On one occasion, Jesus declared to His disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven," and then He added, with some hyperbole, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (*Matthew 19:23-24*).

James did not want his readers to be sorry for themselves and tempted to engage in worldly behaviors. First of all, he reminded them that they had been “chosen” by God — “chosen ... to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he (God) had promised to those who love him.” The key thought here was that believers needed to understand that being “rich in faith” was much more valuable to them than worldly riches, and that qualification to “inherit the kingdom” was to be the goal of this life, not the accumulation of wealth. James might have had in mind the statement of Jesus, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (*Matthew 16:26*)

James wanted his readers to be future-oriented. They needed to maintain an eternal perspective. Their poverty was only in regard to the temporal materialism of this world. As James implied in the early part of this letter, in this world believers would face trials, but these trials were to be recognized as opportunities for spiritual growth — opportunities to prepare for the future, and hence occasions for rejoicing in adversity. The social snobbery of worldly minded people was, therefore, short-sighted and superficial. The favoritism practiced by the readers of this letter was an indication of their shallow immature kind of thinking.

The way that the readers were treating the poor was in contrast to the way that God had chosen them and brought them into His kingdom. By “insulting the poor,” believers were insulting their own brothers! According to James, this behavior was incompatible with the ways of God. James asked three questions in order to get his readers to think correctly about what they were doing.

Question number one: Is it not the rich who are exploiting you believers? The word “exploit” described the brutal ways in which powerful people deprive weaker people of their rights. In the Greek version of the Old Testament the word was used when speaking of the oppression of the poor, the widow, and the stranger (*see Ezekiel 22:29; Zechariah 7:10*).

Question number two: Are not the rich “dragging you into court?” The implication is that the rich were acting unjustly in exercising this power.

Question number three: Are not the rich “slandering the noble name” of Christ? In the Greek language the word for “slander” is *blasphemeo*, and it meant to speak irreverently and disrespectfully of God. For the believers to show favoritism to those who blasphemed the name of Christ was like the ultimate in incongruous behavior.

This letter was written by James to explain the purity of faith and to guide believers to a mature and complete faith. In chapter 1 he explained the importance and value of perseverance in the faith and obedience to the word of God. In this chapter he was calling the believers to resist the temptations of worldly materialism. Materialism has been an on-going problem for the Church since the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and godly attitudes toward material wealth and the people who control such wealth continues to be a major spiritual issue that every believer must deal with.

I said earlier that there were three very important logical arguments that his readers needed to think about. The first argument, which we have been thinking about, related to the inconsistency and incongruity of their behavior. In verse 8 James introduced a second argument. This second argument concerned the rightness or wrongness of their behavior as revealed in “the royal law found in Scripture.” The commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” was originally stated as a fundamental aspect of the Old Testament Law (*Lev 19:18*).

Jesus identified it as the summation of all the Law. When the experts in the law tested Jesus with the question, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment, and the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (*Matthew 22:36-40*).

James wanted his readers to do the “right” thing by showing love to everyone, regardless of their status in life, whether rich or poor. Verse 9 states this truth in a negative way. “Partiality” is not just an insignificant fault or social misdemeanor. It is sin! It is a violation of God’s “royal law of Scripture.” As was presented previously, the readers needed to not only know the word of God, but they needed to do it. Failure to obey would “convict them as lawbreakers.”

In verses 10 and 11, James presented another illustration. He wanted to emphasize the importance of obedience to everything that God had commanded in His word. In the illustration, James described a person who “stumbles at just one point.” Although that “one point” might seem insignificant, it is enough to make the person “guilty of breaking” the whole law.

The key idea here is that the Law is a unity. It is the expression of the character of God Himself, who, by nature, is eternally one hundred per cent pure and holy. Hence, a violation of the Law at any one point is an offense to the character of God. James explained this so that his readers would understand that their acts of partiality were far from insignificant in God's eyes.

The third argument concerned judgment. Verse 12 began with a warning: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged." We have to be careful in interpreting this verse. James was writing to believers, so the judgment he is referring to is different than God's judgment of wrath against non-believers. Believers will be judged as members of God's family and rewarded on the basis of their obedience to "the royal Law found in Scripture," "the law that gives freedom."

There are other passages of Scripture which explain what will happen to believers. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (*II Corinthians 5:10*).

Paul also wrote, "If any man builds on ... the foundation of Jesus Christ ... his work will be shown for what it is. ... It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (*I Corinthians 3:11-15*).

Verse 13 explains what God will do to His followers: "judgment without mercy" will be dispensed to those who have been unmerciful. The context here goes back to the treatment of "those who are poor in the eyes of the world." The point is that those who had received mercy and been chosen by God should likewise be merciful to their fellow believers.

Mercy and love to others should be obvious distinguishing characteristics of born-again believers. If they are present in the believer's life, then the believer will have nothing to fear at the time of judgment. It is in this sense that "mercy triumphs over judgment."

### ***Additional information of interest***

*1) The Greek word is used several other times in the New Testament to describe the character of God. For examples, "God does not show partiality." "God is not a respecter of persons." In the Old Testament, when God instructed Samuel to anoint David, He said that He looked at the heart and not at the physical appearance. Unlike God, humans cannot see beyond external characteristics.]*

*2) Let me give you one more example of clever word usage. The verb translated "discriminated" was also used in chapter 1, only there it was translated "doubt." James had written, "If anyone lacks wisdom, he should ask God, but when he asks he must believe and not doubt," because the person who doubts is a "double-minded man" who will "not receive anything from the Lord." Both passages describe behavior which is contrary to faith. The way for believers is to ask for wisdom in faith, not doubting, and to hold to faith in Christ, not discriminating.*

*Doubters are double-minded, divided within themselves because they lack confidence in God. Believers who show partiality are divided relationally, because they hold materialistic values at odds with faith. Doubters are unsure whether God will or will not give them what they need. Believers who discriminate are using ungodly efforts to obtain favor for personal advantage. The corrective for both inappropriate actions is a more mature faith.*