

The Epistle of James

Lesson #6
October 31, 2021

James 2:1-13

Sometimes, our modern Bibles with their chapters and verses – and section headers – can be a hindrance to our understanding of a passage of Scripture. They can get in the way by suggesting a break in the flow of thought, or by suggesting that a passage stands by itself. This is especially true in the epistles. But as we saw in our earlier discussions of James 1, the context of a verse can be vital to truly understanding what a verse means.

And that is the case with today's passage. So before we head into chapter 2, we need to quickly revisit James 1:26-27.

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

- What are the three tests or signs of "true religion" – i.e. genuine faith – listed here?
 - Controls the tongue
 - Cares for the disadvantaged, or those who can't care for themselves
 - Keeps oneself unstained from the world (in other words, pursues holiness)
- So now this leads us into today's passage:

1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 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," 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 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? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps 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." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

- Which of those three signs of genuine faith do you think is in view here?
 - All three.
 - When we show favoritism, it usually includes our words, in addition to our deeds.
 - While “true religion” ought to be about caring for the poor, they are actually the ones being pushed aside and belittled.
 - To discriminate against anyone, and especially someone who may be a brother or sister in Christ, is a clear example of being stained by the world.

LET'S BREAK THIS DOWN.

1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

- What is partiality?
 - Prejudice; favoritism; preference; discrimination
- What does the phrase “hold the faith” mean?
 - “profess faith”

2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 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,” 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

- The scenario he paints is interesting; but the key issue is “[making] distinctions among yourselves and [becoming] judges with evil thoughts.” This seems to be a pretty harsh statement for an otherwise fairly minor offense. What do you think is the danger in making such distinctions?
 - We are presuming (as the world does) that those who outwardly appear successful are somehow more valuable or important.

5 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? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

- I think we can agree, James is not saying that all “poor in the world” are going to be saved, simply because they are poor, right? So then what is he saying?
 - Among those God has saved are many who would not be considered great in this world.
 - This is a recurring theme throughout Scripture.

Deuteronomy 7:7 -- The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

1 Samuel 16:6-7 – When they came, [Samuel] looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before him.” But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

1 Corinthians 1:20-29 -- Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

- Likewise, James is not saying that all rich people are dragging the poor into court or blaspheming the name of Jesus. And we certainly hope he is not saying that the rich cannot be saved, otherwise all of us are in trouble, right? So what is he saying?
 - It is certainly true that much of the persecution the church has endured over the past two thousand years has come at the hands of the wealthy and successful. So the characterization is fair, even if it is not universal.
 - But even in the passage from 1 Corinthians we just read, Paul says “not many”; he doesn’t say none.
- This passage focuses on rich versus poor. But aren’t there other ways in which we discriminate or show partiality or favoritism? Can you name a few?
 - Race
 - Social status
 - Career success
 - Celebrity
 - Politics – Democratic vs Republican
 - Football – Clemson vs USC (Okay, hopefully that doesn’t affect our fellowship!)
 - Theology or church affiliation

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps 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.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

- Let’s pause for a minute and think about this great commandment, which James refers to as “the royal law” and “the law of liberty”:

In Matthew 22 (and parallel passages), when Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment, he responded, “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.”

How is it that all the Law and the Prophets can be summarized to just these two?

- When we truly love God, we will not want to have any other gods before Him. We will not want to misuse His name. We will want to honor Him in all we think, say, and do.
- Likewise, when we truly love others, we will not want to kill them, or steal from them, or damage their good name.
- So with that in mind, when we show partiality towards one person or group, and away from some other person or group, we are not acting in love. We are behaving more like the world. And we are violating the royal law.
- James says, “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” How can this be true?
 - According to James 1:14, where does sin originate?
 - from within - “lured and enticed by his own desire”
 - It is possible James is using hyperbole, since no honest person would ever say they had committed just one sin.
 - Nevertheless, the presence of even one sin is sufficient evidence of a heart that is not completely given to loving one’s neighbor.
 - The law is a whole, not a bunch of parts.

12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

- James now returns to the theme of his epistle. He wants believers to behave like followers of Christ. To the extent we are showing partiality or prejudice in our relationships, we need to repent. But here is the good news: *Mercy triumphs over judgment!*

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

- In your own words, summarize this passage.
- What is the difference between discrimination and discernment?
- In what ways are you tempted to show favoritism to some and prejudice against others?
- “The people who attend Crossgate Church are fairly homogenous.”
 - Do you agree with this statement? Explain.
 - If you agree, what should we as a church be doing to change that description?
 - If you disagree, in what ways are we showing partiality, and what might we do to address that?