

James 2:1-13 – The Sin of Preference– Part 1

1

Introduction

When we think of God, and His divine nature and attributes, we usually think of such aspects as His holiness, omnipotence, immutability, and love. One attribute that is not thought or spoken of so often is His impartiality. God is impartial in His dealings with people. Human beings, however, are not naturally inclined to be impartial.

2

Introduction

In 2:1–13, James presents five features of genuine, Godlike impartiality:

The principle (v. 1),
 The example (vv. 2–4),
 The inconsistency (vv. 5–7),
 The violation (vv. 8–11), and
 The appeal (vv. 12–13).

3

James 2:1-13

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. ² For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, ³ and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," ⁴ have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?

⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; ⁹ but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. ¹¹ For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

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The Principle

James 2:1

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, *the Lord* of glory, with partiality.

James addresses his readers as “**my brethren**”, indicating that he is speaking out of love and as a fellow believer and brother in Christ. Mostly as a preface to an admonition or warning, James uses this or the expanded phrase “my beloved brethren” fifteen times in this letter.

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The Principle

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The basic principle stated in verse 1, is that genuine faith in Jesus Christ and having an attitude of personal favoritism is **contradictory and incompatible!** If we have placed our faith in Jesus, we will want to be like Him and the Holy Spirit is transforming us into His image. If we behave with preference or favoritism to what others have or can do, it is being out of step with the Spirit of God.

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The Principle

James 2:1

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.

The phrase “**our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory**” is literally, “our Lord Jesus Christ of the glory,” perhaps referring to God’s Shechinah glory (see Ex. 40:34; 1 Kings 8:11). We cannot hold the faith of Jesus Christ, who is the very presence and glory of God, and be partial. **Jesus Himself was impartial** (Matt. 22:16), as indicated by His humble birth, family, and upbringing in Nazareth, and His willingness to minister in Samaria and Galilee, regions held in contempt by the Jewish leaders.

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The Principle

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The arrangement of the text gives the idea of making it a **continuing lifestyle** of not showing favoritism. **Favoritism is not saying that we should not have close friends.** Jesus Himself separated the twelve from the multitude and even in that select group there was the inner-circle of Peter, James and John. What James is warning about here is putting special value on person based on externals. God makes it clear that all men are equal. We must come to see that **true value is not what a person possesses, but in the fact that God loves and died for them.**

Favoritism is a hindrance to the Gospel witness.

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The Principle

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The passage is **not teaching** that we should not show proper respect and honor to the **elderly** (Lev. 19:32) and to those in **authority**, both in the church (1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17) and in society in general (Romans 13:1-5' 1 Peter 2:17).

“Partiality” translates the single Greek word and has the literal meaning of “lifting up someone’s face”, with the idea of **judging by appearance** and on that basis giving special favor and respect. It pertains to judging purely on a superficial level, without consideration of **a person’s true merits, abilities, or character.**

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During His incarnation, **Jesus was the glory and image of God in human form** (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4, 6; Phil. 2:6) and, like His Father, He **showed no favoritism**, a virtue even His enemies acknowledged. It made no difference to Jesus whether the one to whom He spoke or ministered was a wealthy Jewish leader or a common beggar, a virtuous woman or a prostitute, a high priest or a common worshiper, educated or ignorant, law-abiding citizen or criminal. His overriding concern was the condition of the soul.

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God's impartiality is **reflected even in the genealogies** of His Son, Jesus Christ. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus' descendants are shown to include such notable and godly believers as **Abraham, David, Solomon, and Hezekiah**. They also included many obscure and common people, including the incestuous **Tamar**, the former prostitute **Rahab**, and **Ruth**, from the outcast Moabites. Jesus was not born in the great holy city of Jerusalem but in Bethlehem. He grew up in the Galilean town of Nazareth, whose poor reputation among most Jews is reflected in Nathanael's comment to Philip: "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

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The Principle

James 2:1

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The gospel is available to everyone with absolute equality. All are equally valuable in the eyes of God. Our work is equally valuable, and all are important. All believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, are adopted into God's family, and are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is unfortunate and sinful that many churches judge on externals and those who are of a different ethnic background, race, or financial standing are not fully welcomed into fellowship. This is not only a transgression of God's divine law but is a mockery of His divine character.

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The Example

James 2:2-4

For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, ³and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," ⁴have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Though most of the believers in the first century were extremely poor, this passage indicates that at least some of the churches had wealthy members, or at least had wealthy visitors.

"Assembly" has the basic meaning of gathering together and is commonly rendered "synagogue". **"With gold rings"** literally means "gold-fingered," and could indicate the person was wearing more than one ring. It was a common practice among well-to-do people of that day, both Jews and Gentiles, to wear numerous rings on their fingers as marks of wealth and social status. The Roman statesman and philosopher Seneca wrote, "We adorn our fingers with rings and we distribute gems over every joint".

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The Example

James 2:2-4

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"Fine apparel" literally means "bright," or "brilliant." It is used of the "gorgeous robe" that Herod and his soldiers mockingly placed on Jesus before they sent Him to Pilate (Luke 23:11) and of the "shining garments" of the angel who appeared to Cornelius as he was praying (Acts 10:30).

From the context, it seems likely that the imaginary man in James's illustration is a visitor. The sin was not in the man's wearing a gold ring and fine clothes or in his being given a good place to sit. Nor was the sin in the poor man, also perhaps a visitor, being dressed in dirty clothes.

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The Example

James 2:2-4

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In most synagogues of that day, there were only a few benches to sit on, perhaps one or two in the front—the "chief seats in the synagogues" that the scribes and Pharisees coveted (Matt. 23:6)—and possibly some others placed around the walls. Most of the people either stood or sat cross-legged on the floor. Occasionally, someone would also have a footstool. To ask another person, especially a visitor or guest, to sit down by my footstool was therefore a double show of disrespect. The person on a bench or in a chair not only would not give that seat to the visitor but would not even allow him to sit on his footstool.

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The Example

James 2:2-4

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In both instances, **the sin is partiality**, by showing special favor to the well-dressed man and contempt, for the poor man. James states that such discrimination is much more than poor hospitality - it is **evil**. James uses three different words for evil in his epistle. Of the three the one used here is the strongest, **carrying the idea of vicious intentions that have a destructive and injurious effect.**

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So What ...

Romans 15:5-7

Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, ⁶ that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.

God demonstrates His love towards us even while we are yet sinners. We as imperfect Christians are obligated to love one another. The only “favoritism” that the Lord honors is that in which, with humility of mind we regard one another as more important than ourselves (Phil 2:3). That sort of unselfish partiality favors the needs of others above our own, their welfare and well-being above ours.