

Men to Men Ministry**Lesson Eight in the Letter of James****Partiality is a moral Issue which James makes ethical.**

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1 My brothers and sisters, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.

2 For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and is dressed in bright clothes, and a poor man in dirty clothes also comes in,

3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the bright clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,"

4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters: did God not choose 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. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?

7 Do they not blaspheme the good name by which you have been called?

8 If, however, you are fulfilling 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 violators.

10 For whoever keeps the whole Law, yet stumbles in one point, has become 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 do murder, you have become a violator of the Law.

12 So speak, and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom.

13 For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Introduction

Following the theme of quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. 1:19. These three admonitions are about the practice of morals in our reactions to others. Each is a moral decision resulting in a metered action. Hearing that is both immediate and constant. Speaking is a slowing of action to allow thought and level response. Slow to anger is placing limits on our reaction to external disappointment and trial. Each is much more than a keeping of a set of rules, ceremonial routines but is an expression of mercy and grace. As we saw last week in James 1:26 **If anyone thinks himself to be religious yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this person's religion is worthless.**

One of the problems that would come up in the church is the differences between the economic standings of the members and how these two extremes of financial status would interact with each other. The tendency in society is for the rich to look down on the poor and even take advantage of them. This brought a reaction from the poor which led to their despising the rich. James confronts the potential problem in James 1:9-11, but comes back to this theme in Chapter two. It is one of the six themes in James letter to the dispersed Christian Jews.

The church today is made up of both the poor and the rich. There are probably far more poor than there are rich in the church. What James sees is just as true today, the poor are generally more receptive than the rich. The issue to be addressed in our study is what is the proper attitudes toward each other.

Definition: Favoritism / Partiality

An inclination to favor one group or view or opinion over alternatives. A predisposition to like something. An unfair preference for one person or group over another.

Commentary

Verse 2:11

My brothers and sisters, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.

The example James provides describes the reaction of those responsible for the seating arrangements. You could call him the head usher, or presbyter. It is remarkable here to remind us that this attitude of propriety was not based upon any law, command, rule, or order of service. This example was based only on preference, and therefore it was a moral response. One source is quoted, "*deference to the rich and disdain for the poor have always been features of worldliness, and so James insists that such discrimination against the poor is unworthy of the faith.*" In the first verse of our text we find a specific reason we should not have this attitude, "**do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.**"

There seems to be a direct relationship between the exercise of our faith in our redeemer and this moral statement of attitude of favoritism. In this statement find a command or a statement of faith of ethical proportions. "If you have faith in the one who fills your heart with glory, our Lord Jesus Christ, then we will not show favoritism to any that come into your life." Or as Clark restated it, "My brethren, do not make profession of the faith or religion of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with preference of persons?" That is, preferring the rich to the poor merely because of their riches, and not on account of any moral excellence, personal piety, or public usefulness.

Verse 2:2

2 For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and is dressed in bright clothes, and a poor man in dirty clothes also comes in,

The church at the time of James writing was changing. The first churches were in homes. They were the only ones large enough to hold an ever-growing body of believers. Now, sixteen years after the Lord resurrection and the day of Pentecost the church was out

growing even the largest homes. The church started to use secluded store fronts and other underutilized buildings. But these new size requirements required the support of those who were well off, hence the preference toward the well-dressed elite. There was a large gap between the rich and the poor. The existence of a middle class was diminishing. Roman culture included slavery. In Rome itself slaves outnumbered the citizens by a large margin.

It has been said a poor man's dollar goes as far as a rich man's dollar, but the rich seem to have more dollars to spend.

With the pen of James, he describes the sharply different treatments which impressively attired rich man might receive when visiting a Christian assembly as compared to a dirty-looking poor man. The rich and affluent would be offered a comfortable seat, and the other a seat in the back or no seat at all. It may well be assumed that James was intimately acquainted with this behavior of partiality.

The word here for assembly is the same word as synagogue or meeting place. It would be very unlikely that there were many who met in the local synagogue since that would imply that all the Jews in that synagogue had been converted, an unlikely assumption.

Verse 2:3

3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the bright clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,"

The statement. "**Sit here at my footstool,**" means simply "sit here under or below my footstool. There may be a touch of ironic exaggeration in these words for James suggests that the position given the poor visitor is so demeaning as to be underneath the footstool on which the usher rested his own feet!

Verse 2:4

4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?

Those who behave with such outrageous favoritism are to be firmly censured. "If you do this," James is saying, have you not shown partiality among yourselves? This may indeed be the meaning of the text, but it seems too obvious a conclusion to be drawn from the glaring example presented in vv 2-3. These verses can also be understood in the sense "have you not discriminated among yourselves." In that case the partiality is condemned because it draws an unchristian distinction between the rich and the poor man. It implies that those who behave this way have judged the rich man to be better and more worthy as a person than the poor man. But such judgments are morally wrong and make those who exercise them judge with evil thoughts.

Verse 2:5

5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters: did God not choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

Every time James wants to emphasize a thought or begin a new teaching, He always includes the words: beloved brothers or brethren. Here James is adamant that that the

church quickly listens, slows down consider before speaking and not to be angry in their response. Partiality or favoritism toward the rich is simply wrong. The poor may well be rich in God's sight. **“Has not chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith?”**

One of the greatest lessons we can take from our scripture is that FAITH is more important than position, circumstances, notoriety, education, even the wisdom we have prayed for.

It seems that not everyone who has faith can be described as rich in faith. Yet even little faith can have significant results (Matt 17:20; Luke 17:6) because it is in an infinite God. The issue here is not that of eternal salvation. Simple faith in Christ is sufficient to save (Acts 16:31). The issue rather is: How much is a Christian trusting God in his daily life? How high can one's trust rise when outward appearances are deeply discouraging? Ironically a rich Christian may have less opportunity to trust God for his needs than a poor man who must trust Him day by day, and sometimes meal by meal. Thus by the providential arrangement of God a poor Christian may become very rich in the area of personal faith in God, while the rich Christian may be poverty-stricken in this aspect of spiritual experience.

James's readers needed to remember this whenever a scruffy, poor brother came to their assembly. Despite outward appearances, he might be a spiritual millionaire! Indeed, if so, he was also one of the heirs of the kingdom. By this phrase James indicates that the poor man who is rich in faith will be a co-ruler with Christ over the kingdom of God. Just as Christ inherits the kingdom (Ps 2:8-9) because of His loyalty to God the Father (Heb 1:8-9, quoting Ps 45:6-7), so will the co-heirs of His kingdom. Thus, the kingdom has been promised to those who love God. Although salvation is freely bestowed at the moment a person exercises simple faith in Christ for eternal life, the kingdom is not inherited that way. Heirship in the kingdom requires loving God, which can be expressed only through obedience to Him (John 14:21-24), while obedience itself is the product of living by faith (see Gal 2:20). Anyone who does not live this kind of life cannot rightly be called rich in faith, even though he or she has believed in Christ for salvation.

The poor by outward appearances might well be spiritual millionaires.

Verse 2:6-7

6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? 7 Do they not blaspheme the good name by which you have been called?

The poor will always be with us. This is a good thing because from these verses we are told again they are important in the light of God's coming kingdom. Any neglect or dishonor in the meeting place was a failure of faith.

In the Jewish context of this book many unbelieving, wealthy Jews were a source of oppression to Christians and might drag [them] into the courts on any pretext. Moreover, many did not hesitate to blaspheme that noble name "the Lord Jesus Christ," v 1, by which you are called. By putting the statements about rich men in question form, James is simply making them face what they already know. It made no sense for any reader of James to

lavish his attention in welcoming a rich person into the Christian assembly, while at the same time slighting a potential heir of the kingdom!

Verse 2:8

8 If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well.

The failure to avoid partiality in dealing with the rich and the poor was more than a failure to face reality in regard to these two classes of men. More fundamentally, it was a breakdown in Christian **ethics**. It was a violation of Scripture's royal law commanding love for one's neighbor based on how a person would wish to be treated. Certainly no one desired to be slighted in the way described by James (v 3). In calling the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" a royal law. The command to love is royal because it is issued by the King—the Lord Jesus Himself, in fact, first as the divine Revealer (Lev 19:1, 18) and then in His incarnation among men (Matt 22:37-40). But it is also royal because it is conduct of a high order worthy of a king. James is alluding to the theme of heirship in the kingdom which he had just mentioned (Jas 2:5). The heirs were the future kings of God's kingdom and they should conduct themselves according to the royal (kingly) law of love for one's neighbor.

Verse 2:9

9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the Law as violators.

God's demands, his ethical code requires the treatment of all equally. There is no limitation to the diversity of the Kingdom of God. Again James simply puts it as a command, If you show partiality you are sinful. It is the Perfect Law of God, there is no fudging it, no getting around it, no shadow we can place upon it to allow exceptions. The command to love all equally exposes all to the possibility of transgression and the revelation of a lack of faith. The failure to love a brother as yourself which reveals itself in favoritism is simply wrong.

Verse 2:10

10 For whoever keeps the whole Law, yet stumbles in one point, has become guilty of all.

Any failure of favoritism exposes inadequacy in the light of God's holy standards. An infraction of the Law of the sort James is discussing is to break the Law as a whole. No matter how well one might keep the rest of it, a sin against love constitutes a person as a lawbreaker, that is, a criminal before the bar of justice!

Verse 2:11

11 For He who said, "DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY," also said, "DO NOT MURDER." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do murder, you have become a violator of the Law.

James is very strong here. He compares favoritism with adultery and murder. Both of these have a similar punishment of death. James argument has great force. He is saying If you do not commit adultery, but do not murder innocence in one matter does not excuse a person in the other.

Here James was addressing himself to the Jewish Christians that had great reverence to Law-keeping. Their culture and heritage strongly inclined them to this, even

after they had been justified by faith their well ingrained culture looked to the law first. Ethics always overruled any moral decision. Remember ethics is about rules and command and morals is about our passion, our want, our heart. So here James was appealing to the expressed will of God.

But they needed to be reminded that a failure to love a poor brother who came to their assembly nullified any pride they might have in obeying God's Law in other respects. One either obeyed it all, or he did not obey it, whatever the specific infraction might be. Even James's converted readers, however, needed to be reminded of this truth about the Law, unless they ignored their own unloving partiality and carelessly regard themselves as Law-keepers in God's sight. "Don't think that way at all," James is saying, "for your loveless behavior sets you under the Law's condemnation, not the Law's approval!"

Verse 2:12-13

12 So speak, and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom.

13 For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Be clear here it is not the OT Law by which Christians will be judged, but rather by the law of liberty. The qualifying phrase of freedom clearly suggests there is a difference between Jewish law and a law to which we hold through the spirit. Here James changes from the ethical demand to a moral invitation. Again it is a moral decision to speak and act as a Christian. James knows that Christians are "not under law but under grace" (Rom 6:14). James also knows that God's will was extensively revealed for New Covenant people through the apostles and prophets and—above all—through "our Lord Jesus Christ from Glory."

The heavy weight of the word judgement is troubling. It seems to place this idea of favoritism as a mark of the lack of faith at all. That even in the church there are those who may well have office of usher or presbyter who have so little understanding of God's grace they themselves are subject to judgement.

This phrase tells us much about what the Christian is reborn for. It appeals to the fundamental instincts of their regenerate nature. It is not a burden at all as John states in 1 John 5:3-5: **For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome**, but rather allows them to express what they really are as children of God. It is a law of freedom.

We are saved by faith and from this verse we must also live by faith. The Divine Judge will assess the believers' words and deeds with the fullest possible measure of compassion. In that day when we stand in line to enter into heaven no one will enter by their resume but by grace. I am warmed by the thought that my moral and ethical actions of mercy will overcome judgement. But how can they store up the mercy that will be so urgently needed in that day?

Application

James, the brother of Jesus, has just called the Bible a “perfect law that gives freedom”. In Israel’s history, God gave Israel laws only after he freed Israel from slavery in Egypt. The law marked the end of an era of slavery, and the beginning of an era of freedom. God’s laws teach God’s people how to be and remain free. To obey is to be free. And as a people who have been set free, we must look like it.

In this letter, James says free people don’t play favorites and free people care for the marginalized. To do otherwise is to deny that Jesus has set his people free from slavery. To illustrate, James plays out a story of two strangers entering a church. One is clearly rich and one clearly poor. But the rich man is almost immediately offered a seat of prominence and the poor man is told to sit on the floor. But playing favorites this way is to act like there are still slaves in God’s kingdom. Jesus has specially freed the poor of the world to be the inheritors of his Kingdom. To seat the poor on the floor is to treat them like slaves and to deny the inheritance Jesus has already given them. Besides, it’s been the rich who historically oppress and litigate against God’s people. It’s just poor judgment to prefer people who slander the name of Jesus, and discredit his people. And it’s hypocritical to follow a God who became poor only to judge the poor as less deserving of a good seat in God’s church.

Favoritism is not only a denial of our freedom from slavery, but a crime against what James calls the royal law of King Jesus. Jesus told us to love all our neighbors as ourselves.

To judge only some as worthy of our care and attention is to become “lawbreakers” in Jesus’ eyes. It doesn’t matter if we’ve kept all the other laws because King Jesus wrote all the Bible’s laws. Each reveals his desire that all people be treated with mercy. To break one law against your neighbor is to break all of them. It doesn’t matter if we’re not a murderer if we continue to show favoritism.

We’re still guilty of breaking Jesus’ royal law of mercy. So, we should act like people who know that a lack of mercy brings judgment, and mercy towards the marginalized brings freedom. Often, we think that freedom is the absence of laws that constrain our behavior. If we are restrained, we think that means we will never be free to be our true selves. But God’s laws aren’t ultimately restraints.

God made us. God’s laws are how God intends us to be our true selves. He made us to be people who don’t play favorites, who are impartial, and who do justice each time we act. So, if we follow God’s laws we will be totally free.

Famously, Jesus summarized all the laws given to Israel down to two: **love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself**. One way to be truly free is to refuse favoritism between the rich and the poor. But more generally, the more we love God and love one another, the more free we become. James also called Jesus a “lawgiver.” James says Jesus’ laws can be summarized as “mercy.” Which is really good news for people who want to be maximally free. Because there are no restraints or limits that God places on our pursuit of mercy towards others.

So, act like your slavery is over. Be free, don’t play favorites, love your neighbor, and show mercy. I pray that the Holy Spirit will open your eyes to see the God who does not play favorites. And may you see Jesus as the one who makes his people free without partiality.

John Piper summarizes this portion of scripture:

Mercy, Not Racial Prejudice

In verse 13 he says, “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” The meaning here is plain. It's based on the words of Jesus: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). If we don't show mercy, we have not known Christ. A Christian is a person who has seen and tasted, and lives on, the mercy of Christ. If there is no mercy in our lives—if we show partiality because of riches or race and come to no remorse and no repentance—we don't know him and we will perish. But if we have tasted his mercy and treasure it, and live in the liberty of his love, then we will show mercy and that mercy will be the evidence of our faith which carries us through the judgment.

Christ's Glory, Not Man's

This is why James begins where he does in verse 1 in dealing with partiality—he begins with faith in Christ, the Lord of glory. And this is where we will end. He says in verse 1: “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

The key emphasis here is on the word “glory.” James chose to accent that Christians trust Christ the Lord of glory. Why? Because the origin of partiality is either craving for human glory (so you show partiality to the rich or the powerful), or fear (so you show partiality to the one you think will make you safer).

But James' point is: if you know Christ as the Lord of glory—if you trust him as the one who is gloriously strong and gloriously wise and gloriously loving—then you won't be controlled by this craving for human glory or by this fear that uses partiality to be safe. Christ will be your glory—all the glory you need. And Christ will be your security—all the security you need.

So the issue of partiality—because of riches or race—is a huge issue in your life. Are you partial in your attitudes or actions? Or are you trusting Jesus as the Lord of glory? If you are, then his glory will put you in your place and it make you safe. And from that lowly and safe place will flow love, not partiality. Mercy, not racial prejudice.