

James 2:1-13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] James chapter 2 verses 1 to 13. My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 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, 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?

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? But you have dishonoured the poor man.

Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called? If you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbour as yourself, you are doing well.

But if you show partiality, you are committing sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law, but fails in one point, has become guilty of all of it.

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. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

[1 : 2 9] For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. The first half of James chapter 2 tackles the issue of partiality and the preferential treatment of people according to prevailing cultural standards of power, wealth and influence.

This is judgment according to principles contrary to God's own judgment. Opposition to partiality and judgment is found in both Old and New Testaments. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verses 17 to 18.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

In Leviticus chapter 19 verse 15. 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 neighbour.

In Deuteronomy chapter 1 verse 17. You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's.

[2 : 3 9] The danger of such an attitude of partiality and favouritism in the church is immense. It directly undermines some of the central truths of the faith. And such favouritism can be displayed in the ways that different people are welcomed into a congregation.

When people see the rich man, they see the possibility of a beneficial association for them. The poor man, by contrast, offers no such beneficial association. Jesus speaks to such attitudes in Luke chapter 14 verses 12 to 14, when he taught concerning invitations to feasts.

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.

But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

Partiality to the rich over the poor compromises judgment and the truth of God in order to please men. The assembly of the Lord's people is not a place where rich people should be receiving special attention and treatment over the poor, yet it seems that this is precisely what is happening in various situations.

[3 : 53] This is the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. He should be the one exalted. Giving glory to other human beings in the presence of Christ is entirely inappropriate. And James makes his point by giving an illustration of the form that this can take.

Two people walk into an assembly. The assembly is described here using the language of a synagogue, perhaps suggesting a gathering of Jewish Christians. The rich man is treated with great honour and respect, he is given special attention, whereas the poor man is dishonoured, treated as an inconvenience and an embarrassment.

Such different treatment of the visitors reveals the hearts of those showing such discrimination, and the hold that non-Christian values still have over them. They have become judges with evil thoughts.

What James does here is recognise the deeper significance of what they are doing. They are exhibiting the fundamental forms of injustice that are condemned in judges within the Old Testament law.

By speaking of them as judges with evil thoughts, perhaps he wants to alert them that they are held to a higher standard as the people of Christ. A task of judgement has been committed to them, and it is imperative that they fulfil it justly.

[5 : 02] Such standards of judgement are utterly opposed to God's own standards, as James now makes very clear. James' arguments here are reminiscent of Paul's points in 1 Corinthians 1, verses 26-31.

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.

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

God's action in salvation challenges and overturns human values. The Beatitudes is a good example of God's favouring of people dishonoured or marginalised in the world.

[6 : 05] However, the people that James is writing to here dishonour the poor while honouring the rich. The very people who dishonour Christ and his people. Behind this is the question of the true source of honour.

If you are looking merely to human appearances, it would seem that the rich and the powerful and the influential are the source of honour. But if you truly live by faith, you see that God is the true source of honour.

And if we truly want to be honoured, we must act towards God, rather than merely to get the glory of other human beings. Christ is the patron of the poor. The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord.

Throughout the New Testament, we see special concern given to the poor. Partiality either to the rich or to the poor is condemned. But partiality to the rich is generally much more of an immediate problem.

While people typically seek to associate with the rich, the powerful and the influential, this is much less likely to happen in the case of the poor. However, God is a God who does associate with the weak and the poor and the despised.

[7 : 06] Christ came in the form of a servant, the one who was rich associated with us in our poverty, so that we might become rich in him. As Christians, we should be fulfilling the royal law of Christ.

The royal law is love your neighbour as yourself. This refers back to Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

I am the Lord. This is part of a section that also, in verse 15, condemns partiality. Partiality to the rich over the poor is a fundamental failure of love to neighbour.

It renders a person guilty as a transgressor, and it is a far more fundamental sin than many might think. The very golden rule, or royal law, of loving our neighbour as ourselves tackles that partiality at his very heart, the way in which we naturally prefer ourselves and those associated with us over others.

If we truly love our neighbour as ourselves, partiality will be one of the first things to go. The royal law here is similar to what James has spoken of in chapter 1 verse 25, the perfect law or the law of liberty.

[8 : 16] Why is it called the royal law? Perhaps it is because it is the preeminent law. It's the law that sums up and comes at the head of a great many other laws. It's a law that gives unity and focus to much of the body of the commandments.

Perhaps it is also called the royal law as it is the law of Christ our King, a law that expresses his commandment that we love one another. It's the law of the principle of love that should be operative within the life of the people of Christ.

Jesus spoke of the importance of this law in Matthew chapter 22 verses 35 to 40. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?

And he said to him, 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 neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. While God may not be an egalitarian, he has formed people in many different stations in life, given them different abilities and skills and powers that will lead to very different outcomes, there is a concern for a sort of equality throughout the whole of the scripture.

[9 : 28] This concern for equality is not about wealth per se. Inequality in possessions is not treated as an injustice as such. It is not necessarily a result of the fall or of sin that some people have more wealth than others, any more than some people being stronger or more attractive or more intelligent.

However, God is very concerned about the dignity that should be accorded to every human being, a dignity that is recognised in their standing before the law, a dignity that is seen in such things as the protection of their lives, and a dignity that should be seen in society's honouring and protecting their part in its life.

It is very easy to overlook the humanity of the poor, to deny them faith in society, to deny them agency, and a standing and a part that is recognised and protected by their neighbours.

[10:38] Of all the people in the land, these are by far the most vulnerable. God also challenges his people to see themselves in the shoes of such persons. While we all like to associate with the rich, there is in the condition of the poor something that is truer to our condition as human beings relative to God.

God's will for his people is indivisible. This is one of the things that Jesus highlights in his teaching. The law hangs together. One of the points of the royal law is that it sums up a larger body of the law.

We will be judged under the law of liberty. Therefore we must take care with our own judgments. We must measure with the measure that we would be measured by, and be wary of judgments that are according to standards that we would not be judged by.

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