

James 2:1-13 The Sin of Discrimination (part 1)

As a pastor James is concerned with faith that works. As we've seen in cp. 1 his readers are being persecuted for their faith. And, It seems to me that many of them were poor and they were being taken advantage of by the rich (cp. 5:4). But James says, "count it all joy" (1:2), "be steadfast" (v. 3). "Ask God for wisdom" (v. 5). Remember where your faith comes from and the power of God working in your life (v. 18). "Don't be angry. Be quick to listen. Control your tongue" (v. 19). Do not merely "hear" the Word, but "do" the word (v. 22). In all of these things James is concerned with faith that works. And as he considered his readers, he saw something they were doing that was contrary to faith in Jesus. Apparently, some of them were discriminating, or showing favoritism, giving preference to the rich over the poor. Look at v. 1: **"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory."** He is saying, "to discriminate or show favoritism is inconsistent with faith in Christ." Therefore, when those of us call ourselves Christians show favoritism, we sin. I have 2 main truths over the next two weeks from this passage as to why discrimination is a sin. (only 1 today with some applications)

1. To discriminate contradicts God's own attitude. God does not discriminate. Before moving to this truth, let's take a quick look at the specific example in the church to which James is referring. Look at vv. 2-4: **"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?"** He is probably referring to one of their gatherings, either for worship, or possibly for a special meeting in order to make a judgment on something (maybe like our church business meeting). And as folks are coming into the room, the rich man is given a place of prominence over the poor man. I remember living in Russia and often, as a foreigner, I would be given a place of prominence at different meetings. They were honoring me. And this is ok. We do the same when we have guests, and visitors come from outside. But, this is not what was happening in James' context. In their meetings there were new converts, those who had been around for a while, and there may have been visitors. And the congregation was made up of all types of people; poor, rich, middle class, male, female, Jew and Gentile. It seems to me that some of the Christians may have had places of authority in the community and were giving special treatment to the rich at the expense of the poor. Maybe they thought that they, or the church, would receive something from this rich person. And when they did this, they were sinning. V. 4 says, **"have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts."** And in v. 6 he says, **"you have dishonored the poor man."**

In vv. 5-6 James gives them the reason discrimination is sin. It is because God does not act this way, nor is this attitude found in him. He says, **"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?"** This is pretty simple really. He is saying, "Look at the majority of you. You are poor! But, look at your faith! You may not have much money at all, but you are heirs to the kingdom of God." He is saying, "If God were to discriminate and show favorites because of wealth, then very few of us would be saved. And if God only saved the rich,

then God himself would show favoritism towards them.” But the Bible says “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). If God were to show favoritism because of wealth, then the wealthy would be able to boast that they had contributed to their salvation.

At the same time, some may read these verses and think that God shows favoritism toward the poor. It seems clear enough to me that the majority of James’ readers were poor, at least in comparison to those who had money. And it also seems that throughout the Scriptures, the poor make up a majority of those who are saved. And, didn’t Jesus himself say, **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God”** (Matt. 19:24). And when we read the OT, we see over and over again that God gives special care for the poor. The Law of Moses is full of instructions to bless the poor. God is the avenger of the poor, the deliverer of the poor, the defender of the poor, the one who raises them up and blesses them, and the one who says he will punish those who do not regard the poor. James himself says that “true religion takes care of widows and orphans” (1:27). Generally speaking, we do not see this kind of writing towards those who are wealthy. So how do we know that God does not discriminate. In order to explain this, I see two principles at work in James and the Bible: the sovereignty of God in election and humility.

i. The first is the sovereignty of God in election. Look close at v. 5 again. **“has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.”** Here, James is grounding salvation upon the sovereign choice of God to save. The choice of God comes before the richness of faith. And the logic is easy. If salvation belongs to God alone, then where is our boasting. We cannot boast in our riches. We cannot boast in our poverty as if to say, “God gives me salvation BECAUSE I am poor.” Remember what God said to Moses when he asked to see his glory: He says, **“I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”** This is why Paul says, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** This means that God does not look down through the corridors of time knowing a person will make a right decision to follow Christ and then say, “Yes, I will save that person based upon a good decision of faith.” If this is true, salvation is based upon a “good” work and God discriminates.

And think about the mercy of God. If you want to be fair, then salvation never comes your way, only the judgment of God. For when God looks down upon us, he sees that ALL have sinned. In this regard, there is no favoritism toward salvation, but only justice. **“For all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory”** (Rom. 3:23). The mercy of God goes beyond judgment to somewhere we have a hard time grasping. We should not be surprised at God’s judgment. But, we must be surprised at God’s mercy! That He would save ONE sinner is beyond the logic of justice. This is why the incarnation and cross of Christ are so vital. For God lays down his judgment upon his Son on the cross. Here, mercy and justice meet! What a beautiful plan! Christ became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). **“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God . . .”** (1 Pet. 3:18). Brothers and sisters, God is the least discriminating ONE in the universe. Think about it. The VERY ONE who is HOLY, the CHOSEN ONE, the SON of GOD, the ONE who deserves glory and honor in his sinless perfection, the ONE who

does not deserve judgment, is the VERY ONE who freely chooses in obedience to the Father to indiscriminately lay down his life in the place of those who deserve judgment.

ii. Humility. At the same time, we see another principle. This is the principle of humility which we see in James and the entire Bible. In James 4:6 we read: **“God opposes the proud but gives grace too the humble.”** Do you remember where James gets most of his teaching? It comes from Jesus’ sermon on the mount. And what were his first words: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God”** (Matt. 5:3). Brother and sisters, salvation comes to those who know they do not deserve the grace of God. They know that in and of themselves, they can do nothing. In this regard, salvation is all of grace. Jesus says **“it is not the well person who needs a doctor, but the sick”** (Luke 5:31). This is why when I see a humble person, I think, **“This person is not far away from the kingdom.”** And this is why we so many poor people who are **“rich in faith.”** James is not saying the rich person cannot be saved. Neither is he saying, the poor are God’s favorite. Salvation of God is based upon the grace and mercy of God.

One of the best places in the Bible to find both of these principles together is Jesus’ prayer in Matt. 11:25-30: **“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”** Here we see the sovereignty of God in his plan to show his grace to sinners. And we see the sovereignty of the Son as well. And then we see the responsibility of man to come to him in humility as Jesus says, **“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”** God does not discriminate! He cannot! Let me end with some applications.

Application: Do not show favoritism. This is a great sin for the Church of Christ. V. 1 says, **“My brothers show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”** As Paul says, **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** (Gal. 3:28). The people of God in the church is the ONE place where there must be no discrimination. We must not think we can gain from the tithe or position of a rich member. We must welcome all types of people, the widow, the orphan, the homeless, the one who has no money, the black, the white, the yellow, the red, the democrat, the republican. For where would any of us be without the mercy of God.

Application: Discrimination divides. Look at v. 4: **“have you not then made distinctions among yourselves . . .”** We must never be divisive in the church of Christ by discrimination or showing favorites. This is exactly what was happening in the Corinthian Church with the Lord’s Supper.

Application: Discrimination may reveal the heart. See v. 4: **“and become judges with evil thoughts.”** Now, I can give the benefit of the doubt to a new believer who honestly doesn’t know better. But, to a person who calls him/herself a Christian and still show favorites, we must question the heart. **“For out of the heart the mouth speaks”** and makes judgments. So, brothers and sisters, look at your heart. Do you show favorites in the church, or in your employments that

run contrary to what we've learned today? If so, look at your heart. Repent. Thank God for these truths and go and sin no more, as you look to Christ as the one who has forgiven your sins.

Application: Give God All the glory for his work of salvation. Jer. 9:23-24: **“Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”**

Application: God works through the weak things of this world to bring about his plans. Often God works through those who are poor materially. But he does this to display the greatness of his plan to bring about his kingdom through such people. The greatest evidence of this is in the incarnation of Christ. The Word of God says to us: **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”** (Phil. 2:5-11).

Application: We must learn to love weakness. For in such things, the greatness of God is displayed. Paul prayed three times for God to take away his “thorn in the flesh” and heal his body. He did not take it away. God says to Paul, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** And then Paul says, **“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”** (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Whether it is cancer, a sprained ankle, arthritis, a speech impediment, down syndrome, whatever, God is working in such things. And when we do not realize it, what a blessing we miss! Learn to love your weakness. For in them, God is glorified greatly!