

James: sermon #4
Rich man, poor man
(James 2:1-13)

Introduction

In chapter 1, James notes that the testing of our faith produces endurance; and that for faith to be real, it must be translated into works (the “**doing**” of God’s word). Now in chapter 2 **James illustrates what this faith looks like in its application.** He begins with an illustration **concerning two visitors to church: a rich man and a poor man.** James **invites** us to consider how each is treated. His point is this: **love for God and faith in Jesus must be expressed in love for people.** Said another way, how we treat people (**our works**) says a lot about how we view God (**our theology**). He makes this point by **exploring the practical implications** of four points of theology: Jesus’ **divinity**, God’s **grace**, God’s **word** and God’s **judgment**.

1. Jesus’ divinity (2:1–4)

1 My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Perhaps a more accurate translation of v. 1 is this: “***My brothers, do not hold the faith of Jesus Christ our glorious Lord together with acts of favoritism***” (Luke Timothy Johnson translation). If we truly express our union with Jesus, “***our glorious Lord***” we will share his faith in God, which is reflected in his teaching about how to treat people. Sadly, some believers show favoritism. They covet recognition and honor and vie with one another for praise. Many churches have cliques, and some members use their church office to feed their egos (**wanting to be Lord instead of Jesus**). James urges us to **get a new perspective on who we are by remembering who Jesus is:**

1. ***Jesus does not respect persons***

Even his enemies admitted, “***You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are***” (Matt. 22:16). Jesus did not look at the outward appearance; **he looked at the heart.** He was not impressed with riches or social status. The **poor widow** who gave her mite was greater in his eyes than the rich Pharisee who boastfully gave a large donation. Furthermore, he saw the **potential** in sinners. **In Simon**, he saw a rock. **In Matthew** he saw a faithful disciple who would one day write one of the four Gospels. The disciples were amazed to see Jesus talking with the sinful woman at the well of Sychar, but **Jesus saw in her an instrument for reaping a great harvest.** Let’s listen to Jesus’ physical brother James and see Jesus and HIS POTENTIAL IN OUR LIVES!!!

We are prone to judge people by their past, not their future. We are also prone to judge by outward appearance rather than by the inner attitude of the heart. We do not enjoy sitting with certain people in church because they “**are not our kind of people.**” Jesus was the ***friend of sinners. He welcomed them into his presence.***

2. Jesus was willing to take the low position

Jesus was himself “***the poor man***” who was rejected by his own (Isaiah 53:1–3). He grew up in the despised city of Nazareth in a home that knew the feeling of poverty. Had you and I met him while he was ministering on earth, we would have seen nothing physically or materially that would attract us. Yet, ***Jesus is the glory of God!*** In the Old Testament, God’s glory dwelled first in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34–38), and then in the temple (1 Kings 8:10–11). When Jesus came to earth, ***God’s glory*** resided in him (John 1:14). ***Today, through our union with Jesus, his glory is manifested in us individually*** (1 Cor. 6:19–20), ***and in the church collectively*** (Eph. 2:21–22). Do we let that glory shine?

Sad to say, we often hide Jesus’ glory. When visitors come into our churches, we tend to judge them on what we see outwardly rather than what ***they are in their inclusion in God’s love and life through their union with Jesus.*** Dress, color of skin, fashion, and other superficial things carry more weight than the ***fruit of the Spirit that may be manifest in their lives.*** We cater to the rich because we hope to get something out of them, and we avoid the poor because they embarrass us. This is not Jesus’ way.

How do we ***participate in the love and life of Jesus*** in and through our human relationships? ***We look at everyone through Jesus’ eyes.*** Jesus has ***united himself to all humanity through his incarnation.*** In him, ***humanity is reconciled to the Father: they are accepted, included and forgiven.*** This is how Jesus views ***all*** people, and ***so should we.*** It is Jesus who is the link between us and all other humans, and that link is love. ***Remember:*** God uses even the most unlikely person to bring glory to the name of Jesus. So don’t show favoritism!

2. God’s grace (2:5–7)

5 Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? 6 But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

The emphasis here is on God’s *choosing*, and it is all of grace. If salvation were on the basis of human achievement or attractiveness, it would not be of grace. Grace ***implies*** God’s sovereign choice of those who cannot earn and do not deserve his salvation (Eph. 1:4–7; 2:8–10). ***God saves us completely on the basis of Jesus—who he is and what he has done (and is doing).*** As a result, God simply looks on people

differently than we tend to. From the human point of view, God chooses the poor instead of the rich. ***“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong”*** (1 Cor. 1:26–27). The poor of this world become rich in faith; as sons of God, they inherit the wealth of the kingdom. God promises the kingdom to ***“those who love him”*** (James 2:5), not to those who love this world and its riches.

James’ stern rebuke in James 2:6–7 says essentially this: ***“When you despise the poor man, you are behaving like the unsaved rich people.”*** In that day, it was easy for rich persons to exploit the poor, influence decisions at court, and make themselves richer. Unfortunately, we have the same sins today that blaspheme the very name of Christ. Our Lord was poor, and he too was the victim of injustice perpetrated by the wealthy leaders of his day.

If we truly embrace and express the grace of God in Christ, ***we will relate to people on the basis of God’s love and not on the basis of human merit*** (including social status). ***Through his incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension Jesus broke down the wall that separated Jews and Gentiles*** (Eph. 2:11–22), ***rich and poor, young and old, educated and uneducated.*** It is wrong for us to build those walls again. We will not do so if we truly possess and express the grace of God.

3. God’s word (2:8–11)

8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking 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 commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

God’s word points ***holistically to the practical outworking of our love for God in love for neighbor*** (here quoting Lev. 19:18). Jesus exemplified and taught this principle. In the parable of the Good Samaritan he noted that ***our neighbor is anyone who needs our help*** (Luke 10:25–37). Thus the law to love neighbor as self is the ***“royal law”*** because it is ***articulated and ratified by Jesus as the summation (fulfillment) of the Torah*** (the Law of Moses, which includes the ten commandments, here cited by James—see also Matt. 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14).

James’ point is that showing favoritism is contrary to the law of love (the ***“royal law”***). To show favoritism (which may seem like only a small issue) is, ***in actuality, to break the law of love in its entirety.*** ***But to live and thus fulfill that law is to treat others as God treats us.*** Doing so is ***an act of the will, not an***

emotion we try to manufacture. **Our motive is to glorify God by participating actively in the conveyance of his love. We do so through our union with God in Christ by the Spirit (“for the fruit of the Spirit is love”). Love always builds up (1 Cor. 8:1) but hatred (including favoritism) tears down.**

4. God’s judgment (2:12–13)

12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

James, writing to Christians, says they will “**be judged.**” What is this judgment? We know from the testimony of all scripture that it’s not about condemnation or punishment for sin—these have been taken care of for us by Jesus, **our substitute.**

What judgment is James here speaking of? The judgment which Peter says is now upon God’s family, the church (1Pet 4:17). It involves an **evaluation of our works**, which James says **reveal the genuineness of our faith**. Works done in the flesh (and not in faith through the Spirit) are judged inferior and “burned up.” **Those done by faith through the Spirit are judged genuine and rewarded (1Cor. 3:11-17).**

What is the basis of this judgment? The “**law that gives freedom**” (James 2:12), which is the “**royal law**” (James 2:8) and God’s “**word of truth**” (James 1:18). We are judged by the law of love, **which is revealed in the gospel of grace**. In short, **Jesus and his love is the standard**. It is **his works** that we share through the Spirit. **And such works are rewarded**. As Jesus said, “**blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**” And in the final analysis, “**mercy triumphs over judgment.**”

Here’s how this judgment is conducted:

1. Our words are judged

Note the words spoken to the two visitors in James 2:3. **What we say to people, and how we say it, is noted by God**. Even our careless words are judged (**measured against the standard of Jesus and his love**) (Matt. 12:36). Of course, the words we speak come from the heart; **so when God evaluates our words, it is our hearts that are being judged** (Matt. 12:34–37). Love is **expressed (or repressed)** through our words and **James wants Christians to be sure to control the tongue**.

2. Our actions are judged

It is true that God remembers our sins no more (Heb. 10:17); **but our behavior still has consequences. Unloving deeds that express a lack of mercy toward others bring negative consequences.**

3. Our attitudes are judged

James here contrasts two attitudes: **showing** mercy to others, **and refusing** to show mercy. If we have been merciful toward others, *we will receive mercy from God*. This does not mean that we earn God's mercy by our merciful attitudes. Were it earned, it would not be mercy. Rather James' point seems to be that **where God sees mercy in our treatment of others**, he finds '**fertile soil**' in which to grant even more of his mercy and grace into our lives. But where God finds unloving, unmerciful behavior, the flow of God's grace is blocked. For example, if we are unforgiving to a brother, then we have the kind of heart that is not open toward the forgiveness of God.

Conclusion

James' message is clear. Those who experience freedom in Christ must not use that freedom as license to disobey the very foundation of that freedom, namely Jesus' law of love. If we really believe that Jesus is the glorious Lord, and that God is indeed gracious, that his word is true, and that we are rewarded by our works, then our conduct will reveal those convictions. The conduct that concerns James has to do with how we treat people. May that treatment express fully God's royal law of love—the law that brings true freedom!

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