

The Book of James

Lesson 4: The Sin of Favoritism -- James 2:1-13

Picture the scene James paints. Two men walk into the assembly on the same morning. One wears a gold ring and fine clothing; the light seems to catch him as he enters. The other is poor, his clothing shabby, and something in the room shifts when he comes through the door. Without anyone announcing a policy, a hundred small signals go to work. The well-dressed man is shown to a good seat. The poor man is told to stand off to the side, or to sit on the floor by someone's feet. No one called it a sin. Everyone felt it was simply normal.

James calls it what it is. To hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, while showing partiality is a contradiction at the root. He asks a pointed question: have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? The favoritism that feels so natural, so harmless, so much like ordinary good sense, is actually a courtroom in which we sit as corrupt judges, ruling on people's worth by the cut of their clothes.

Then James turns the tables in a way that must have stung. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom? The very people the world overlooks, God has often delighted to honor. To despise the poor is to despise those whom God has chosen, and to fawn over the rich is frequently to flatter the very people who oppress and exploit. The church's instinct had things exactly backward.

At the center of it all stands the royal law: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Partiality breaks that law at its core, because it loves some neighbors and dismisses others. James will press all the way to judgment, reminding us that we will be judged under the law of liberty and that mercy triumphs over judgment. So we come to this passage to have a sin exposed that most of us commit without noticing, and to learn to see every person, rich or poor, impressive or overlooked, through the eyes of the God who shows no favoritism.

Group Discussion: Think about the unspoken signals that shape who feels welcome and who feels overlooked in a group, a workplace, or a church. Where have you seen favoritism operate without anyone ever naming it out loud?

Personal Reflection: Be honest about whom you are naturally drawn toward and whom you tend to overlook. What does that pattern reveal about the standards by which you quietly measure people's worth?

Read James 2:1-13

Study Questions

1. James writes, "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (v. 1). Why does James treat favoritism as fundamentally incompatible with genuine faith in Jesus, and what does it say about Christ that partiality dishonors Him?
2. Think about the people you find easy to welcome and those you find easy to ignore. Where do you see partiality at work in your own attitudes, even in subtle ways you would not normally call sin?
3. In the example of the man with the gold ring and the poor man in shabby clothing (vv. 2-4), James says those who show partiality have "become judges with evil thoughts." What does it mean that favoritism turns us into corrupt judges, and what standard are we using when we do it?
4. When you size someone up quickly by their appearance, status, usefulness, or success, what does that snap judgment reveal about what you actually value? How would Jesus have you see that person instead?
5. James asks, "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?" (v. 5), and notes that it is often the rich who oppress believers (vv. 6-7). What does this teach about how God's values differ from the world's, and about who is truly honored in the kingdom?
6. Where have you been tempted to measure your own worth, or someone else's, by wealth, status, or influence rather than by being an heir of God's kingdom? How does God's choice of the poor confront that?
7. James calls love of neighbor "the royal law" and says that to show partiality is to commit sin and be "convicted by the law as transgressors," adding that whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point is guilty of all (vv. 8-11). Why does James connect favoritism so directly to the command to love your neighbor, and what does it teach that breaking the law at one point makes us lawbreakers?
8. Is there a particular person or group you have effectively excluded from "neighbor" in your heart? What would it look like to love that specific neighbor as yourself this week?
9. James concludes, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (vv. 12-13). What does this teach about how we will be judged, the relationship between the mercy we show and the mercy we receive, and how the gospel of mercy frees us from the favoritism that fears and flatters?
10. Look back across the whole passage. James exposes a sin we commit almost without noticing and calls us to the mercy that triumphs over judgment. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to lay down partiality and love a particular neighbor this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Leviticus 19:15, showing no partiality in judgment, whether to poor or great; Acts 10:34–35, God shows no partiality but accepts all who fear Him; 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord looks on the heart, not outward appearance; Matthew 25:34–40, serving Christ in the least of these; Galatians 3:28, all one in Christ Jesus; Matthew 7:1–2, judged by the measure we use for others.