

JAMES 2:1-13—TREATING STRANGERS LIKE FRIENDS¹

INTRO: All of us like some people better than others. That is perfectly normal. However, that starting point tends to morph or grow or develop in all of us so that, without even realizing it, or realizing how we got there, we all tend to have various *biases*, i.e., an irrational predisposition *in favor of* certain groups of people and various *prejudices*, i.e., an irrational predisposition *against* certain groups of people.

For example, what's the first thing that leaps to your mind when I say: Democrats; Liberals; Muslims; Republicans; Tea Party; Catholics; Fundamentalists; Atheists; the Rich; Homeless people; Homosexuals. I could go on and on. But I think you see the point. We all tend to stereotype certain groups of people, often without even realizing we're doing it—either positively or negatively.

Why is this important? It's important for a number of reasons. But one of the main reasons is that how we live and act and how we treat other people begins first in our mind, in our feelings, in our deep-seated attitudes that we may not even be fully aware that we have. We may be warped without even knowing it. And that is especially likely if most of the people we hang out with are pretty much just like us. Our attitudes and actions then become reinforced and are seen as positive and good and normal, so that to even think of questioning our attitudes and behaviors is not even on the radar screen.

And yet all the while we may have created for ourselves a world of attitudes and actions that is far from God, that is dishonoring to God, and that is causing others to reject Christ because they know we are Christians but they see how unChristian we are—and we are not even aware of any of this.

Today's passage, **Jas 2:1-13**, powerfully addresses this very issue: the sin of partiality or favoritism. **[READ Jas 2:1-13]** What is this passage telling us? It is telling us to:

PROP: Treat strangers like friends.

O/S: As we look at this sin of favoritism, this passage will help show us: (1) why this sin is so bad; (2) the effects of favoritism on others and on ourselves; and (3) how we can begin to overcome this sin of favoritism and begin treating strangers like our friends.

I. Why is the sin of favoritism so bad?

James has used one of the most common examples of partiality—giving a rich person prominence and preference over a poor person—because it is so prevalent and universal. But the *principle* he is talking about applies to all other kinds of partiality as well. In **vv. 1-11** James has actually given us a good theology of why showing partiality is so sinful:

A. v.1—Jesus is our Lord of Glory. If we give certain people the glory, like the rich man in James' example, then we are acting as if Jesus is no longer the Lord of Glory. Even the Declaration of Independence says, **“all men are created equal.”** That is a biblical principle, since God is equally the creator of all. And, especially as Christians, we need to remember that as **Galatians 3** says, **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** So when we give certain classes of human beings preference at the expense of other classes of human beings, what James is saying is that we are actually dethroning Jesus Christ from the position of preeminence that He alone is entitled to.

B. v.4—When we show partiality, we become judges with evil motives. In **John 7:24** Jesus said, **“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”** When we start discriminating based on mere externals, however, such as economic status, race, tribe, etc., God considers this an evil form of judgment, because the basis of the judgment is based on irrelevant factors. Even worse, judgments based on such external factors are mostly colored by such things as greed, envy, hatred and other *sinful* motives.

C. vv.5-6—When we show partiality, we dishonor those whom God has honored. Jesus himself was a poor man. He said, **“blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).** When we discriminate against any class of people we are, in effect, spitting in the face of God who has blessed and chosen people out of *every* “tribe, tongue, nation, and people” in the world. We are essentially saying, “God, you have bad judgment for favoring such people. I have better judgment than you do, because I don't like such people.” Think of the arrogance of that!

D. vv.6-7—On the other hand, by showing partiality toward the ungodly rich and powerful we are honoring those who dishonor Christ. When we honor and favor blasphemers because they happen to be rich or powerful, we share in the responsibility for their blasphemies. Paul made a similar point in **1 Tim 5:22** when he said, **“Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others.”**

¹ The outline referred to in the audio of this sermon just before the introduction is set forth on page 4.

What James and Paul are both saying is that how we treat people has implications far beyond what we tend to see. They are saying that showing preference for an ungodly person because he is rich goes beyond the money; it is really vouching for and approving the person's ungodly and blasphemous life.

E. vv.8-11—When we show partiality to people based on non-biblical criteria, we are breaking the “Royal Law.” To “**love your neighbor as yourself**” is called the “Royal Law” because it is from the King himself. Additionally, in **Gal 5:14** Paul points out that the whole law is summarized and fulfilled in the statement, “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**”

The fact that the whole law is fulfilled by loving your neighbor as yourself leads to James' point in v.10, “if you keep the whole law but stumble in one point, you become guilty of all.” Why does he say that? The reason is that the law is a whole—sort of like a chain. To break one link involves breaking the whole chain. God's law was given by Him. Therefore, even the smallest sin involves an offense against the Lawgiver, because it implies a rejection of his *whole* authority over *all* the areas of our lives.

God gave his law in part to expose the condition of our hearts. He knows that we look at the outside—but He looks at the heart. When we show partiality we are really exposing the contempt we have for someone in our heart—because Jesus said in **Mark 7:21**, “**out of the heart come the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries.**” Interestingly, both in **Mark 7** and here in **James 2**, Jesus and James link evil thoughts, murder, and adultery. They both know that all of these things are simply manifestations of a corrupt and evil heart. In that sense, therefore, showing partiality to someone based on external characteristics is not just some “little sin” that we are all prone to. Instead, it is as deadly as murder or adultery.

Is that the way we think of it? That's the way Jesus and James think of the sin of partiality.

II. What are the effects of the sin of partiality or favoritism?

So far we have seen that the sin of showing partiality to people based on external, nonbiblical criteria is actually far worse than we might have otherwise imagined. We need to remember that everything we do is having the effect of making us more or less like Christ—and of drawing people closer to Christ or pushing them away from Him. We may not be able to see that, but that's the fact. So we need to consider what happens to our witness for Jesus when we show partiality. Let's look at James' example of discriminating against a poor person in favor of a rich person:

A. What is the effect on the poor person? Isn't he likely to think, “If that's how they treat me, then why should I become a Christian, or come to this church? They are no different from the world.”

B. What is the effect on the rich person? He knows he's being used. Isn't he likely to think, “I'm getting this honor because I'm rich, because they want my money. They are no different from the world.”

C. What is the effect on the church? James began **ch.2** by referring to believers—the church—as “**brethren.**” All believers are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are all equal in God's sight, because we are all part of the same family. In fact, we have all been adopted into God's family. Therefore, to show discrimination *among Christians* based on non-Christian, external characteristics, is a great sin because it strikes at the heart of what Christ has done for us in saving us all equally, in giving us all his Holy Spirit equally, and in adopting all of us into his family equally. And to favor certain rich *non-Christians* over poor “brethren” is even worse! Such behavior divides the church. What Christ has joined together we must not put asunder.

D. What is the effect on nonbelievers? When a nonbeliever sees us discriminating based on nonbiblical, external characteristics isn't he likely to think, “if that is what Christians and Christianity are like, then why should I become a Christian? They are no different from the world.”

E. And what is the effect on us? In **vv.12-13** James tells us [**READ vv.12-13**]. We will be judged by Christ—by the Gospel, which is the “**law of liberty,**” the “law of Christ.” James had earlier told us that, when we make distinctions among ourselves based on nonbiblical, external reasons, we “**become judges with evil motives or thoughts.**” Now in **vv.12-13**, when he talks about “judging” and “mercy,” I think James is alluding to what Jesus said in **Luke 6:36-38** when he said [**READ Luke 6:36-38**].

What we do in this life—especially how we treat people—has effects that we cannot see. And it has effects not only in this life but also in eternity. We need to try to bring this to our conscious awareness all the time as we go about our daily lives. That's why the Bible says “**take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ**” (**2 Cor 10:5**). As we do this, we will start living more intentionally. We will start living more Christlike lives. We will start becoming more like Christ Himself.

Which leads us to the question:

III. How can we begin to overcome the sin of favoritism?

James has already pointed the way in **v.8** when he says [**READ v.8**]. “Love your neighbor as yourself” might sound like a simple solution to the problem, but if you think about it, to “love your neighbor as yourself” is actually as deep or deeper a good as partiality is a deeper-than-you-think sin. Why is that? To love your

neighbor “as you love yourself” is not just a trite or superficial slogan. We’ve all heard that said 100 times. Therefore “love your neighbor as yourself” tends to fly off the top of our head without having much impact.

To love your neighbor “as you love yourself” is a very radical thing. If you think about it, it means that we should spend the same amount of time, effort, thought, and money doing good for others as we spend doing good for ourselves. It’s sort of like in the Lord’s Prayer when Jesus said to pray like this: **“forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”** We’ve all said that 100 times, but have we thought about what Jesus is saying? He’s saying, “only to the extent that you forgive others’ wrongs against you will my Father forgive you.” And He is also saying that, when we pray that prayer what *we* are saying to the Father is “Father in heaven, I want you to forgive my sins *only to the extent that I forgive others who wrong me.*”

That is a radical prayer, just like “love your neighbor as yourself” is a radical mindset and lifestyle. That is what Christianity is designed to be: a radical and different way of living and viewing people and dealing with people: IOW, treating strangers like friends. One reason that people—particularly young people—are not coming to Christ but are leaving the church in droves is because they don’t see Christianity being lived and applied that way—the way Jesus and Jesus’ brother James called for us to live.

Scot McKnight has written about applying this in his books *The Jesus Creed* and *40 Days Living the Jesus Creed*. There are also *The Jesus Creed for Students* and *A Companion Guide to the Jesus Creed*. And what is “the Jesus Creed”? It is simply this: **“Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.”** That is how Jesus puts it in **Mark 12:29-31.**

What McKnight suggests is this: say the Jesus Creed out loud to yourself when you wake up in the morning, and also in the evening, and during the day whenever you think of it. He found himself saying it 30-40 times per day. You might try doing that every day for a month. I heard McKnight preach on this, and he said that he has been repeating the Jesus Creed himself everyday for over 7 years now.

This is not vain repetition. Instead, repeating the Jesus Creed regularly is an exercise designed to make it become a part of us. Then look for ways to apply it. In the sermon he preached, McKnight gave some examples. One was of a guy who started repeating the Jesus Creed and later wrote to McKnight to say that, as he did so it started affecting him. It changed his life and saved his marriage—because, if we take this seriously, we cannot continue to treat people, including our own spouse (maybe especially our own spouse), the way we have been doing if we are really to love him or her as we love ourselves. We’ll start treating them like friends.

That is why in **Matthew 22** when He was talking about this, Jesus said that **“On these two commandments [i.e., on the Jesus Creed] depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”** That is another way of saying that the entire Bible is based on loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. If we take Jesus seriously, if we take the Bible seriously, if we truly take Him and his Word into us—into the very fabric of our being—our lives will be different. They will be better. And they will be demonstrably and visibly better. This probably will result in changes. But wouldn’t it be fantastic to know that we are, in fact, becoming just like Jesus? This is Jesus’ summary of how to do it.

The last thing is this: You cannot separate the two commands. You cannot love God and not love your neighbor. In fact, the Apostle John tells us in **1 John 4:20**, **“If someone says ‘I love God’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; because the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”** What John is saying is that “how we do the 2nd command—love our neighbor—is the proof, is the test, of whether we are really doing the 1st command—loving God.”

We love our neighbor because our neighbor has been created in and bears the IOG. And how we treat God’s image shows what we really think of Him. The 1st command—loving God—should be the reason and motive for doing the 2nd command—loving our neighbor. But the 2nd command—loving our neighbor—is the mirror or reflection of how we love God. When we look at it this way, *we will never be in doubt about what our relationship with God really is.* We will always have visible, physical proof as to the state of our relationship with God: whether it is good or bad; whether it is growing or regressing.

CONCL: How we treat people shows what we really think of God. That is why, on the night before He died, Jesus told his disciples, **“No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends” (John 15:15).** He also said this, **“greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).** That is what Jesus did for us.

We do not discriminate against our friends. So Jesus calls us to treat strangers like our friends: to love them and care for them just as He loved us and just as we love ourselves. That’s what deep friendship is all about. This begins among our brothers and sisters in Christ—but it extends to every human being with whom we deal. Imagine the possibilities if some of us actually started doing this.

JAMES²

James has a discernible structure which may be seen in two ways: (1) The short, pithy sayings (aphorism, maxims) of chapter one correspond to sections in subsequent chapters.³ Chapters 2-5, at least in a general way, are in the reverse order of the sayings in chapter 1 to which they correspond. The integrating apex of the book is 3:13-18, “the wisdom from above,” which is what is necessary for us to live as we should; and (2) It uses an alternating series of contrasts between the positive way in which we should live and the negative (sinful) ways in which we tend to live.

1:1-27—Introduction of all the major themes: positive

- Sender and addressees (1:1)
- Testing, trials, and temptations (1:2-4, 12-15)
- Wisdom, grace, and prayer (1:5-8, 16-18)
- The rich and the poor (1:9-11)
- The tongue (1:19-21, 26)
- True faithfulness (1:22-27)

2:1-13—The sin of *partiality* (see 1:9-11): negative

2:14-26—Living/working *faith* (see 1:22-27): positive

3:1-12—The sin of the *uncontrolled tongue* (see 1:19-21, 26): negative

3:13-18—The *wisdom from above* vs. the wisdom not from above (see 1:5-8, 16-18): positive

4:1-5—*Indwelling sin* and its outward manifestations: quarrels; conflicts; fighting; murder; adultery, i.e., signs that you do *not* have the wisdom from above (see 1:13-15): negative

4:6-10—How to *seek* God’s grace and *obtain* the wisdom from above (see 1:2-4, 12): positive.

4:11-5:6—The sin of *autonomy* and its outward manifestations: judgmentalism; presumption; and materialism, i.e., signs that you have *not* humbled yourselves or submitted to God (see 1:9-11, 13-15, 19-21, 27): negative

5:7-20—Concluding exhortations which again address the major themes, except the rich/poor issue, which was dealt with in 5:1-6: positive

- Testing, trials, and temptations—5:7-11, 13 (see 1:2-4, 12-15)
- The tongue—5 :9, 10, 12, 16 (see 1:19-21, 26)
- Prayer—5:13-18 (see 1:5-8)
- True faithfulness—5:19-20 (see 1:22-27)

²Suggested structural outline by Jonathan Menn.

³“Chapter one functions as something of a ‘table of contents’ for the treatise, or as an ‘overture’ of its themes” (Luke Timothy Johnson, *James*, Anchor Bible Commentary, 15).