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New Hope Baptist Church Bible Study

LESSONS FROM JAMES

Week 10: We are Family

JAMES 2:1-13

In 2:1-13, James gives a practical lesson: **we are not to show favoritism**. Such discrimination violates God's truth.

James actually almost takes welcoming strangers for granted. He is urging us to be alert about the *way* that we welcome strangers into the church. He does not want the warmth or honor of our welcome to be determined by the status or apparent wealth of the visitor.

It is showing favoritism based on social standing that James specifically condemns. He makes it a cause for questioning the reality of a person's faith.

JAMES 2:1

As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. (NIV) James appeals to a single fact that binds these people together—they are all believers. The family relationship he is describing is limited to those who believe in **our glorious Lord Jesus Christ**.

For example, each of the terms in James's title conveys an aspect of his understanding of Christ's unique role:

- The one in whom we believe is **ours**. There is personal ownership and relationship. "Jesus is *our* Lord."

Because of their shared position as believers. If we want to be called Christians, believers in Christ, then our life needs to display the effects of that belief.

Don't show favoritism. (NIV) Another translation would be "Stop showing favoritism." The construction of the Greek shows that James was forbidding a practice already in progress. This phrase has also been translated, "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" (NRSV). *The believers receiving this letter were already guilty of practicing discrimination.*

- a) The believers apparently were judging people based only on externals—physical appearance, status, wealth, power; as a result, they were pandering to and being unduly influenced by people who represented these positions of prestige.
- b) The church had many poor, outcasts, and those of little class or influence. So when a rich person was converted, the church members needed to guard against making more of a fuss over him or her than they would at the conversion of another poor person.

Scripture had *warned against favoritism* (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:17; Psalm 82:2; Proverbs 18:5). James emphasized two clear points:

1. Favoritism goes against God's royal law to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (2:8). Showing favoritism based on external considerations is inconsistent with faith in Christ, who breaks down the barriers of race, class, gender, and religion (Colossians 3:11).

Does Your Church Show Favoritism?

Ask these questions:

- How closely does our congregation reflect the socioeconomic and racial neighborhood in which we gather?
- In our church, people may not be ushered to good or bad seats, but in what other ways might we be favoring the rich or discriminating against the poor?
- Would a poor person feel welcome in our church? Would a rich person feel welcome in our church?
- In what ways do we consciously or unconsciously favor some people over others in our church?
- How can our ministry reach out to all people without any hint of discrimination?

JAMES 2:2

If a person. .. comes into your assembly. One With gold rings, in fine apparel. (NKJV) One man was rich, as noted by his clothing and jewelry. A ring signified upper class and power. Rings were the same kind of visible status symbols that cars function as today. The rich man here is not a Christian (as in 1:9-11) **And a poor man in filthy clothes. (NKJV)** This poor man was dressed in filthy rags; he was most likely a beggar. James makes it very clear that the action about to be taken, if not guarded against, will be based entirely on the appearance of these two guests.

- The decision to follow Christ has often been made easier by a warm and honest welcome at the door of a church.

JAMES 2:3

You pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes. (NKJV) The rich man was shown special attention—the Greek word meaning “to look with favor on” a person. The believers were impressed by him. He became the object of special service and deference. **And say to him, “You sit here in a good place.” (NKJV)** The rich man was singled out and escorted to a comfortable and favored seat.

Say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit here at my footstool.” (NKJV) The poor man gets standing room only, or a seat on the floor. It's as if he is being told to stay apart from his “betters” by allowing them the seats, while he is given neither dignity or comfort.

It is our relationship with Christ that gives us dignity, not our profession or possessions.

The Christian answer is not reverse discrimination—treating the poor like royalty and the rich like scum. Our goal is to treat people without consideration for their status.

The point is that favoritism is not just mistreating people or breaking a standard of conduct—it is, in fact, treating Jesus as though he had little value.

When we gather for worship, we ought to be conscious that even if we are familiar with everyone in the room, Christ is present. If there are two or three of us gathered in his name, he is there (Matthew 18:20). Before we worship, we ought to recognize Christ's presence.

When Jesus meets with us, does he assume a place of honor or jostle for our attention? Or should we imagine that Jesus takes the place of deepest humility among us and waits to be recognized as Lord? When we neglect or ignore the poor or powerless, we also ignore Christ.

JAMES 2:4

Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Why is it wrong to judge a person by his or her economic status? Wealth may indicate intelligence, wise decisions, and hard work. On the other hand, it may mean only that a person had the good fortune of being born into a wealthy family. Or it can even be a sign of greed, dishonesty, and selfishness.

All these motives are selfish. They may appear nothing more than practical considerations, but James calls them evil.

Another false assumption that sometimes influences our treatment of the rich is our misunderstanding of God's relationship to wealth. It is deceptively easy to believe riches are a sign of God's blessing and approval. But God does not promise us earthly rewards or riches; in fact, Christ calls us to be ready to suffer for him and give up everything in order to hold on to eternal life (Matthew 6:19-21; 19:28-30; Luke 12:14-34; 1 Timothy 6:17-19). We will have untold riches in eternity if we are faithful in our present life (Luke 6:35; John 12:23-25; Galatians 6:7-10; Titus 3:4-8).

JAMES 2:5

Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith. (NKJV) Jesus' first followers were common people. Christianity has a special message for the poor. *Each believer is very valuable to the church.*

And to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? (NIV) This does not mean that rich people are doomed and that poor people are automatically saved. Christianity offered much to the poor—the common people clamored to follow Jesus.

- To continue to show favoritism to those who are only rich by the world's standards is not only wrong, but shortsighted.
- Rich or poor, believers must obey God and love him. This could be called the heart of James's message. If we really love God, both our faith in him and our obedience to him will be right.
- *We will not belittle anyone with whom we share a common inheritance.*

JAMES 2:6

But you have insulted the poor. (NIV) The Greek word for *insulted* is *etimasate*, which means "dishonored" (NRSV; NKJV). James's readers had dishonored the poor because they did not treat them as God treats them.

James showed how evil their actions were by asking three questions.

- A. First, **Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? (NIV)** In this society, the rich oppressed the poor. To *exploit* means to use someone for profit—to take advantage of someone and to use him or her selfishly for one’s own purposes
- B. Second, **Is it not they who drag you into court? (NIV)** The rich typically showed no mercy or concern for the poor. They would take the poor to court, most likely for not repaying a debt. The Bible does not deny that rightful grievances occur between people. They include forgiveness, reconciliation, restitution—all handled among believers themselves.

JAMES 2:7

Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? (NIV) These rich people were abusing the name of Christ either by speaking evil of him or by insulting Christians.

James asks his readers to listen carefully while he reminds them of the role the rich tended to play in their society. They were oppressors who exploited the poor (2:6). The rich oppressed others by:

- Exploiting them and their livelihood (2:6)
- Threatening their security (2:6)
- Attacking their identity (2:7)

James’s answer is, “Don’t show favoritism.” It is a negative application of the royal law that he is about to introduce, and upon which every application eventually rests.

JAMES 2:8

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well. (NKJV)

- Love is the source from which our attitudes toward others should flow. This royal law is a law from the king himself, in this case, the King of kings (see Matthew 22:37-40). This law is God’s will for his followers, for he said, “Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

We are to show favor to everyone, whether the person is rich or poor. We are to be kind, overlooking other superficial trappings. Our attitudes and actions toward others should be guided by love. When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39 NRSV).

JAMES 2:9

But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (NKJV) Showing favoritism is not a minor transgression or an unfortunate oversight; according to James it is sin, and those engaged in this action are lawbreakers.

1 John 3:4 says, “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness” (NIV).

Discrimination against anyone, whether on the basis of dress, race, social class, wealth, sex, etc., is a clear violation of the royal law of love. We must treat all people as we would want to be treated.

We should not ignore the rich because then we would be withholding our love. But we must not favor them for what they can do for us, while ignoring the poor who can offer us little in return.

Showing Favoritism

Why is it wrong to show favoritism to the wealthy?

- It is inconsistent with Christ's teachings.
- It results from evil thoughts.
- It insults people made in God's image.
- It is a by-product of selfish motives.
- It goes against the biblical definition of love.
- It shows a lack of mercy to those less fortunate.
- It is hypocritical.
- It is sin.

JAMES 2:10

For whoever shall keep the whole law and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. (NKJV)

James's point here is showing favoritism that no matter what commandment someone breaks, that person is guilty of an offense against God. *He or she has violated the will of God.*

JAMES 2:11

For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. (NKJV)

- God's law was not written with "heavy" and "light" commands so that obedience to some outweighed obedience to others. Believers are called to consistent obedience
- Before God, self-justification is always a wasted effort. As lawbreakers we should come in confession and humility, placing ourselves under God's mercy and grace.

JAMES 2:12

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. (NIV) Obedience must also be a life-style, a habit. *Speak and act* covers all human behavior

JAMES 2:13

Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. (NIV) Mercy is precisely what the believers were *not* showing when they insulted poor people. If they continued to discriminate, they would be in danger of facing their own judgment without mercy. What we do to others we actually do to God, and he returns it upon our heads.

We must be merciful because God is merciful:

The world is looking for evidence that God is merciful. Being people who have experienced mercy and who express mercy will catch their attention.