

July 6, 2014/ James 2 (ESV¹)

James has told us to "count it all joy," to grow up, to view things as they really are, instead of from a blinded selfish perspective, to let the twists and turns of life bring us to full steadiness in Christ, to be stable and single-minded, to not fool ourselves by just being hearers and not doers of the Word, to be fully consistent and completely honest in our faith. Now we come to Chapter 2. He shows us two sorts of glory and requires that we choose.

Jas 2:1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

Literally, this is "**My brothers, not with partiality of any sort must you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the glory**" There is the glory of God, the true way of seeing and judging, the right perspective and standard. But you and I are tempted and apply not those, but the standards and perspectives of the world.

Jas 2:2 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,

Jas 2:3 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,"

Jas 2:4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

The sin of partiality is the sin of judging by accidentals and externals. James is not saying we should not respect and defer to elders. He is not saying that we don't owe respect to people who hold high office. He is not saying that we aren't to respect people who have beauty of character, steadfast faith, or real accomplishment. He is saying that to reckon as the world reckons and judge by appearances and wealth is a wrong. Why? Do we put the Lord's glory first in our scale of values, or do we follow the world in deciding what is of value? The "among yourselves" here is probably better rendered "in your hearts." The verb rendered "making distinctions" indicates "facing both ways," both toward Christ and simultaneously toward the world's snobbery based on money and appearances. Jesus, who was rich, for our sakes became poor. His grace flows without respect to wealth or appearance. To turn that upside down is a double sin. First, we wrongly assume that we even have the right to be making that kind of call. Second, we get it wrong by running contrary to the truth. These are evil thoughts.

Jas 2:5 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?

James doesn't mean that poverty is a prerequisite for salvation. But it is absolutely an empirical truth that by and large, true believers are not wealthy. God blesses those who are His. But those are not figured the way the world figures.

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1Co 1:26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

Of course, not all those who are saved are poor, but God's heart is especially revealed in His care for the downtrodden.

Deu 10:17-19 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. ...

Jas 2:6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?

Jas 2:7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

Again, of course, not every rich person is a hater of Christ and an oppressor of the poor. But it is from those quarters where persecution typically comes. So why would believers turn upside down the wonderful impartiality of God and fawn after the rich and powerful? But the whole business of classifying people and reacting to them on the basis of externals is flawed. In the end, what right interaction with others comes to is to "keep the royal law."

Jas 2:8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well.

Jas 2:9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

Favor rich over poor or poor over rich, favor one race over another, favor those who are in our "club" on any basis and we do wrong. The King's rule is that everyone we meet who needs care and attention is owed the same love that we have for ourselves.

Motyer says, "Here, then, is a law which comes to us with all the weight of scriptural authority, but which in particular is marked out as being a special concern of our King, something that is specially suited to him and which comes to us bearing the royal arms upon it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself (8). How very important the last two words are! They are the key to the whole meaning. If we want to know how we are to love our neighbours, then we must ask a prior question: how do we love ourselves? Never (it is to be hoped!) with an emotional thrill; rarely, as a matter of fact, with much sense of satisfaction; mostly with pretty wholesale disapproval; often with complete loathing — but always with concern, care and attention. When we catch sight of our faces in the mirror first thing in the morning, the word 'Ugh' comes spontaneously to the lips; yet at once we take that revolting face to the bathroom, we wash it and tend it and make it as presentable as nature will allow. And so it goes on through the day: loving ourselves means providing loving care and attention. This is the model on which we are to base our relationships to all to whom we owe neighbourly duty. Everything conspires today to define 'love' primarily in emotional terms. Scripturally, love is to be defined in caring terms, for the love that is owed to our neighbour is the love we expend on ourselves."

This is no small thing. We don't get to treat this as optional, reserved for those who have some special "gift" or "calling" in this matter. This is basic denial of selfish interests. This is the universal law of the Kingdom.

Jas 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

Jas 2:11 For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

Every one of us is undone here. You and I are not consistently as concerned about others as we are about ourselves. We are swimming in a world of neighbors and would plead that we aren't capable of caring for them all, let alone inclined to try to care for any significant fraction of them. If there was no mercy on God's behalf here, we'd be doomed. God's law is indivisible because it is the expression of who He is and way things really are, and failing here we fail, period. But

Jas 2:12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

Jas 2:13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Take this seriously and we can trust that God is merciful. Blow it off and we should fully expect judgment. Of course we should. Ignoring the King's law says we aren't really His subjects. Be partial, care not for others, and what exactly does one have? No real faith, that is for sure.

Jas 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

Real faith is a working faith. It is more than simply mental assent to the facts. It is surrender to the King. It is obedience to Him, and His law is "love your neighbor as yourself." It is casting oneself wholly on the mercy of Christ and running along behind Him, doing His will. What good is a naked mental assent to the facts? None.

Jas 2:15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,

Jas 2:16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

The basic question is whether our behaviors are consistent with the heart and actions of our God. And if God were this kind of person, looking on our misery and doing nothing about it, we would be in terrible straits. How in the world then, could this kind of practical unconcern about the misery of other humans be consistent with a real faith? That would be absurd, simply absurd.

Jas 2:17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

This is not philosophy or debate we're discussing here. This is reality. And once more, naked mental assent to the facts means nothing. Motyer calls this "armchair philanthropy." One with a false faith doesn't risk anything for anyone else. Self is still supreme.

Jas 2:18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

The exact intended meaning of the Greek here is apparently not clear. But what is clear is the inseparability of real faith and works consistent with that faith. James isn't even close to saying that works merit salvation. But a real faith is one that produces actions consistent with reality.

Jas 2:19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!

Mental assent alone accomplishes nothing and provides no peace with God. It's something that the demons can and do have. And no one with any sense would think of them as at peace with God. James now cites 2 Old Testament cases of real faith.

Jas 2:20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

Jas 2:21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

Jas 2:22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;

Jas 2:23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"--and he was called a friend of God.

When God told Abram to leave Ur, he went. When He told him to sacrifice his son (the very covenant promise himself!) Abraham was ready to do so. If we won't act, it is not true that we believe in the Biblical sense of the word. Real faith, a faith that saves, is a faith that acts, and acts in accord with the King's wishes.

Jas 2:24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Jas 2:25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

Between Abraham and Rahab we have the spectrum of people of faith. Abraham was a rich person, central to the whole Biblical story, a respected man. Rahab was a minor character, a poor person of ill repute, and a woman. But both had faith that works. Rahab put herself at risk for strangers in a hard spot, trusting that God was with them and for them.

Jas 2:26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Real faith is obedient. Real faith puts selfish interests to death.