

James Chapter 2

Verses 1-13: James begins this passage on partiality with an exhortation (verse 1), then a brief illustration (verses 2-4). Most of this discussion is an argument against partiality (verses 5-13). First, partiality shows inconsistency in one's conduct: Those we spurn are the ones God has chosen (verse 5), and shows inconsistency in one's conduct: those we favor are the godless whom God rejects (verses 6-7).

Second, partiality is more than an error in judgment; it is an act of sin. The one who shows respect of persons is a transgressor of the law. The law is like a ring or hedge encircling those within. When one breaks this ring, he stands outside (verse 10), becoming a transgressor, whether he commits adultery, murder, or shows partiality. Third, James argues that partiality provokes God's judgment (verses 12-13).

James 2:1 "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, [the Lord] of glory, with respect of persons."

"The faith": This refers not to the act of believing, but to the entire Christian faith (Jude 3), which has as its central focus Jesus Christ.

"Our Lord Jesus Christ": Christ is the one who reveals the glory of God (John 1:14; 2 Cor. 4:4-6; Heb. 1:1-3). In His incarnation, He showed only impartiality (Matt. 22:16). For example, consider the non-elite people included in His genealogy, His choice of the humble village of Nazareth as His residence for 30 years, and His willingness to minister in Galilee and Samaria, both regions held in contempt by Israel's leaders.

"Respect": Originally, this word referred to raising someone's face or elevating the person, but it came to refer to exalting someone strictly on a superficial, external basis, such as appearance, race, wealth, rank or social status (Lev. 19:15; Job 34:19; Deut. 10:17; 15:7-10; 2 Chron. 19:7; Prov. 24:23; 28:21; Matt. 22:8-10; Acts 10:34-35; Romans 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; 4:1; 1 Peter 1:17).

I believe what James is trying to say here, is that being a respecter of a person because of his station in life is not consistent with Christianity. Jesus taught that we are not to be a respecter of persons, if we are Christians.

Luke 20:21 "And they asked him, saying, Master, we know that thou sayest and teachest rightly, neither acceptest thou the person [of any], but teachest the way of God truly:"

We see the same teaching from Peter in the following Scripture.

Acts 10:34 "Then Peter opened [his] mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons:"

James 2:2 "For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment;"

“Assembly” Literally “a gathering together” or “synagogue”: Since James was writing early in the church’s history to Jewish believers (1:1), he used both this general word and the normal Greek work for “church” (5:14), to describe the church’s corporate meetings during that period of transition.

“Gold ring”: While Jews commonly wore rings (Luke 15:22), few could afford gold ones. However, there are some reports that in the ancient world the most ostentatious people wore rings on every finger but the middle one to show off their economic status (some ancient sources indicate that there were even ring rental businesses).

“Goodly apparel”: This word refers to bright shining garments and is used of the gorgeous garment Herod’s soldiers put on Jesus to mock Him (Luke 23:11), and of the apparel of an angel (Acts 10:30). It can also refer to bright, flashy color and to brilliant, glittering, sparkling ornamentation. James is not condemning this unbeliever for his distracting dress, but the church’s flattering reaction to it.

“A poor man”: Although there were people of means in the early church, the church consisted mostly of common, poor people. Throughout Scripture the poor are objects of God’s special concern.

We can easily see from this, that the church is not for just one class of people. This also, shows that just because a man was rich, did not mean that he could not be saved. The fact that a person was very poor, did not keep him from joining the church either.

James 2:3 "And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:"

“Sit thou here in a good place”: A more comfortable, prominent place of honor. The synagogues and assembly halls of the first century sometimes had benches around the outside wall and a couple of benches in front. Most of the congregation either sat cross-legged on the floor or stood. There were a limited number of good seats; they were the ones the Pharisees always wanted (Mark 12:38-39).

James is showing them in this, that they had been showing preference to the rich. In God's sight, the rich should be given no more privileges than the poor. There are many churches today that would turn away the poor man in this instance.

Vile raiment might be just enough to keep them not only at the back, but completely out of the church. The outward appearance of a man does not reveal what is in his heart. The heart determines whether you are a Christian, or not.

James 2:4 "Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?"

“Not then partial”: or “made distinction”. The true nature of the sin in this passage, not the lavish apparel or rings of the rich man or that he was given a good seat.

“Judges of evil thoughts”: This is better translated “judges with vicious intentions”. James feared that his readers would behave just like the sinful world by catering to the rich and prominent while shunning the poor and common.

Church is not for the privileged few, but for all who seek God. We are not to judge man at all, but if we did, we would not judge fairly. We would be thinking of the flesh of man, and God looks at the heart of man.

James 2:5 "Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?"

“Hath not God chosen” Here James intends the kingdom in its present sense of the sphere of salvation, those over whom Christ rules, as well as its future millennial and eternal glory.

In the following Scripture Jesus says that it is hard for a rich man to enter heaven. He did not say it was impossible, just difficult. The reason for that is because the rich man has a hard time putting anything ahead of his riches. God will not take second place.

Matthew 19:23 "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 19:24 "And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

For a person to come to Christ, he must humble himself before God. The humbling is much easier for the poor, because they are already in practice of being humble.

James 2:6 "But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?"

“Oppress”: Literally “to tyrannize.”

“Draw you before the judgment seats”: A reference to civil court.

James is explaining that poor men seldom oppress anyone, but it is generally the rich who oppress the poor, not the other way around. The rich sometimes hold important offices in government, and have more opportunity to oppress.

James 2:7 "Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?"

“Blaspheme that worthy name”: Probably a reference to religious courts. Wealthy Jewish opponents of Christ were harassing these poor Christians (John 16:2-4).

Notice in the following Scripture, the holiness of the LORD.

Jeremiah 23:6 "In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this [is] his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS."

The name that we are called is Christian, which means we are followers of and believers in Christ.

Ephesians 3:15 "Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,"

The family is made up of the sons of God. Those who choose to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ are the sons of God.

John 1:12 "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, [even] to them that believe on his name:"

James 2:8 "If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well:"

“Royal law”: This is better translated “sovereign law.” The idea is that this law is supreme or binding.

“Love thy neighbor as thyself”: This sovereign law (quoted from Lev. 19:18), when combined with the command to love God (Deut. 6:4-5), summarizes all the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:36-40; Romans 13:8-10). James is not advocating some kind of emotional affection for oneself, self-love is clearly a sin (2 Tim. 3:2).

Rather, the command is to pursue meeting the physical health and spiritual wellbeing of one’s neighbors, all within the sphere of our influence (Luke 10:30-37). With the same intensity and concern as one does naturally for one’s self (Phil. 2:3-4).

Jesus explained that loving God and loving your neighbor fulfilled all your obligations, if you were a Christian. Look with me at the following Scriptures on this.

Matthew 22:37-40 "Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." "This is the first and great commandment." "And the second [is] like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

James 2:9 "But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors."

“If”: Better translated as “since,” the Greek construction of this conditional statement indicates that this practice was in fact happening among James’ readers.

“Have respect”: The form of the Greek verb indicates that their behavior was not an occasional slip but a continual practice.

“Convinced of the law”: Specifically by the commands (in Deut. 1:17 and 16:19).

“Transgressors”: This refers to one who goes beyond the law of God. Respect of persons makes one a violator of God’s law.

If you respect someone because of their wealth or position in society, you have not kept the two laws Jesus said covered all the laws.

James 2:10 "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one [point], he is guilty of all."

“Whole law ... one point”: The law of God is not a series of detached injunctions but a basic unity that requires perfect love of Him and our neighbors (Matt. 22:36-40). Although all sins are not equally damaging or heinous, they all shatter that unity and render men transgressors, much like hitting a window with a hammer at only one point will shatter and destroy the whole window.

“Guilty of all”: Not in the sense of having violated every command, but in the sense of having violated the law’s unity. One transgression makes fulfilling the law’s most basic commands, to love God perfectly and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, impossible.

This is speaking to those specifically who have not accepted the sacrifice that Jesus made as being sufficient for all sin, and are trying to keep the Mosaic law. The keeping of the law saves no one, because they cannot keep it in its entirety. The forgiveness through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ saves you.

James 2:11 "For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law."

James is trying to show, in this, that by the keeping of the law, no man is saved. The penalty for sin is death. Jesus took our sin upon His body on the cross, if we are believers; we are not guilty of sin. We have been pardoned by His great act of mercy.

The keepers of the law are not Christians, because they have not accepted the full pardon through the shed blood of Jesus for their sins.

These quotations are taken from (Exodus 20:13-14 and Deut. 5:17-18).

James 2:12 "So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty."

“Perfect law”: In both the Old Testament and New Testament, God’s revealed, inerrant, sufficient and comprehensive Word is called “law” (Psalm 19:7). The presence of His grace does

not mean there is no moral law or code of conduct for believers to obey. Believers are enabled by the Spirit to keep it.

“Liberty”: Genuine freedom from sin. As the Holy Spirit applies the principles of Scripture to believer’s hearts, they are freed from sin’s bondage and enabled to obey God (John 8:34-36).

The law of liberty in Jesus Christ is what Christians are under. We are not perfect, just forgiven. We are righteous in the sight of the Father, because we have been washed in the precious blood of Jesus Christ and made righteous. We have taken on His righteousness in exchange for our sin.

James 2:13 "For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment."

A person who shows no mercy and compassion for people in need demonstrates that he has never responded to the great mercy of God, and as an unredeemed person will receive only strict, unrelieved judgment in eternal hell.

“Mercy rejoiceth against judgment”: The person whose life is characterized by mercy is ready for the Day of Judgment, and will escape all the charges that strict justice might bring against him because by showing mercy to others, he gives genuine evidence of having received God’s mercy.

This is so similar to what the Lord Jesus taught. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven. If you will not forgive, then you shall not be forgiven.

Matthew 5:7 "Blessed [are] the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy."

Matthew 6:15 "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

1 John 4:8-12 "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him." "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son [to be] the propitiation for our sins." "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." "No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us."

Verses 14-17: “Can faith save him”? This statement and others (in verses 14-26), persuade some critics that James is teaching salvation through faith and works. Luther called this epistle “strawy,” believing it emphasized works too much. Today, some regard it as a late writing in which the author is reacting to Paul’s doctrine of salvation by faith alone. This is not the case. James’s teachings reflect neither a negative nor a positive response to Paul’s teachings. For Paul, faith practically equals salvation. James however, sees two kinds of faith: saving faith and professing faith (much like the usage today). For Paul, justification is by faith (Rom. 4:5).

For James, justification is by a faith that works, by a genuine faith that manifests itself in post-conversion works. Before salvation, these Jews had believed in the efficacy of works. Now some were reacting at the opposite extreme, imagining that works play no part in the salvation experience. James retorts that the kind of faith that does not produce works is not saving faith.

As Calvin said, "Faith alone saves, but a faith that saves is never alone." Thus, James's question is not simply can faith save? But as the Greek text may suggest, "Can that faith save him?" Can merely professed but undemonstrated faith save? The Greek grammar expects a negative answer to the question that ends (verse 14). Hence it can be rendered, "That faith (i.e., the one mentioned in verse 14a which is without works), cannot save.

James 2:14 "What [doth it] profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?"

"That a man say": This important phrase governs the interpretation of the entire passage. James does not say that this person actually has faith, but that he claims to have it.

"Faith": This is best understood in a broad sense, speaking of any degree of acceptance of the truths of the gospel.

"Have not": Again, the verb's form describes someone who continually lacks any external evidence of the faith he routinely claims.

"Works": This refers to all righteous behavior that confirms to God's revealed Word, but specifically, in the context, to acts of compassion (verse 15).

"Can faith save him?" Better translated, "Can that kind of faith save?" James is not disputing the importance of faith. Rather, he is opposing the notion that saving faith can be a mere intellectual exercise void of a commitment to active obedience (Matt. 7: 16-18). The grammatical form of the question demands a negative answer.

We all know the answer to this is, that we are saved by faith and faith alone, but if we are saved, we will have works showing our faith. The works are a manifestation of our faith.

Matthew 5:16 "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

The works of a Christian speak to the world of the faith he has.

James Chapter 2 Questions

1. What does the author believe James is saying in verse 1 here?
2. What did Peter have to say about the same thing?

3. How was the rich man described in verse 2?
4. What type of raiment did the poor have?
5. What lesson can the church today learn from James 2:2?
6. What did they say to the person in gay clothing?
7. Where did they tell the poor person to stand?
8. Church is not for the _____ few, but for all who seek God.
9. What is the difference in the way God looks at man, and the way man looks at man?
10. Why is it difficult for the rich man to be saved?
11. Who are the oppressors in this world, usually?
12. What name of God is in Jeremiah 23:6?
13. What does the name Christian tell about us?
14. What are you doing when you respect someone more than others, because of their wealth, or position?
15. What is the royal law?
16. On what two commandments, did Jesus say hang all the law and prophets?
17. Who is verse 10 really speaking of?
18. By the keeping of the law is _____ saved.
19. Why are the keepers of the law not Christians?
20. Who is under the law of liberty?
21. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love _____.
22. What is the answer to verse 14?