

February 19, 2023

“Responsibility of Those Called”
Lesson 3

James 2:1-12

Intro

There have, unfortunately, been division in the Church for most of its existence. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is proof that churches had this problem from the earliest days. The most obvious cause for divisions runs along doctrinal issues. But there are others as well that cause problems. Differences in culture, socioeconomic status, race, and others can be things that divide a church. The truth of human nature is that we tend to associate with people who we see as being like us. The more differences there are in a group, the more likely the group will have to deal with instability and issues.

James was the half-brother of Jesus and a leader of the church in Jerusalem. This church was more than just one congregation among many. It was the mother church, the hub of all Christianity at the time. What happened in that church mattered to all Christianity and all churches everywhere. In today's passage, James addresses an issue present in churches then, and likely in churches and in our lives today: favoritism.

Read James 2:1-12

1. vs. 1: James addresses this to “my brothers and sisters”

These are obviously meant to be those who are followers of Jesus
They are all of one family spiritually, even if not physically

He says that favoritism cannot exist in followers of Jesus, who died for all

Though he doesn't quote them, here are several OT references to this concept:

Deut. 10:17: “the Lord your God is God of gods...who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes”

2 Chron.19:7: “...for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery”

Lev. 19:15: “Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly”

Prov. 24:23: “To show partiality in judging is not good”

Here are several NT references saying the same thing:

Acts 10:34: Peter says, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism”

Rom. 2:11: “For God does not show favoritism”

Eph. 6:9: “Master, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.”

Col. 3:25: “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism.”

What is true of God's character is to be true of the Christian following Him
There is to be no partiality or favoritism within the body of Christ.

2. vs. 2: James introduces a hypothetical situation would could easily be true in many meetings
The word for “meeting” is the Greek word for “synagogue”
James is writing to Christians of Jewish background, so this term fits their situation

The two men are distinguished by their social status, as shown by their clothes
The one man is rich, shown by his gold ring and “fine clothes”
The other is poor, shown by his “filthy old clothes” with no mention of a ring

We don’t know if these two are visitors or regular attenders
They key point is that the first man has significant social status; the second has none

3. vs. 3: James continues the hypothetical story by saying “If…”

The rich man is shown “special attention”

He is shown to a seat which has benefits, maybe close to the front

The poor man is shown no “special attention”; he is disrespected and disregarded

He is told, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet”

Sitting on the floor instead of sitting in a chair (a seat) is degrading

Sitting on the floor is often the position of a servant to a master

4. vs. 4: After presenting the situation in vs. 3, Paul asks a question with an obvious answer
“have you not discriminated and become judges?”

The answer to that is an obvious “Yes”

Another word for discriminated is prejudiced, meaning favoring one over another

The second phrase, though, is even more concerning

Judges are supposed to be objective, impartial

If the judge has evil thoughts, there is no impartiality to their judging

Judging with evil thoughts comes from an evil heart

This is not what God’s nature is like, the One we are to imitate

Treating the rich and the poor in these two ways may have been custom in the 1st Century

The practice is denying the nature of God who they say they serve

5. vs. 5: This verse presents the first of 3 arguments about why showing partiality is wrong

James again phrases is as a rhetorical question whose implied answer is “Yes”

Favoritism is inconsistent with God’s choosing “those who are poor in the world”

Here are a few verses that show God’s choice of the poor:

Ps. 10:14: “But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.”

Ps. 18:27: “You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.”

Is. 11:4: “But with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.”

God doesn’t despise or reject the poor because they don’t have the resources others have

He takes especial interest in and care of them because of their vulnerability

The first part of verse 6 finishes this condemnation

“You have dishonored the poor”

Believers in God have dishonored other believers by how they have treated them

6. vs. 6b: Here James presents his second argument against favoritism

“Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not...dragging you into court?”

Again, the implied answer to both these questions is “Yes”

Today, we might say this as, “Why are you being extra nice to that person who is doing bad and mean things to you?”

This tendency to show treat the rich this way seems common to human behavior

We tend to be drawn to wealth, celebrities, status

If someone fits this bill, we tend to cut them slack in other areas

Perhaps we are hoping to get close to this situation, to be part of the “in” group

We seem to recognize this when we look at others, at situations outside ourselves

Do we recognize or examine ourselves for some of these same attitudes?

7. vs. 7: Here is the third argument

Those rich who exploit others also blaspheme “the noble name” of God

To be fair, not all rich people exploited others then, nor do all today

Apparently in James’ church, there were rich who treated others in this way

They pretended to be practicing godliness while mistreating their brethren

James says that pretense amounts to blasphemy

Ezekiel 36:22 and Romans 2:17-24 both refer to blasphemy by wrong actions

8. vs. 8: James instructs believers to “keep the royal law”

“Love your neighbor as yourself”

This idea first comes up in Lev. 19:18

Jesus says it is one of the two greatest commandments (Matt. 22:34-40)

Loving one’s neighbor excludes partiality and prejudice

The story Jesus tells is of a Samaritan—who were hated by the Jews—

helping a wounded Jew

This is a demonstration of love, an exclusion of partiality or prejudice

The Samaritan knew how Jews viewed his race; he chose to help instead

Unlike other law codes of the time, the Law of Moses didn’t have different levels

The same protections existed for all classes of people

Kings and servants, wealthy and poor, Israelites and foreigners

The same standards applied to all people, regardless of status (or lack of it)

See Ex. 23:3, Num. 15:15-16, and Deut. 1:16-17

9. vs. 9: James is as explicit here as it is possible to be

“If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers”

Showing partiality or discrimination is *sin*

The word convicted hits strongly—it means declared guilty according to the law

Discrimination/partiality is a failure to love, and love is at the core of the law

There is no wiggle room, no gray area, when it comes to showing favoritism

10. vs. 10: The concept James describes here is a key point of the Law of Moses
The Law isn't a collection of individual commands; it is a unified whole
God's standard wasn't to obey most of the Law, but all of it
Failing to keep *one point* of the law was breaking *the whole law*
James said in vs. 9 that showing favoritism was being a "lawbreaker"
Those showing favoritism have broken the whole law, not just a piece of it
11. vs. 11: James uses an example from the Ten Commandments to make his point
God said, "Don't murder", and He also said, "Don't commit adultery"
If you don't do one, but do the other, you are still a lawbreaker
12. vs. 12: James concludes this section with an admonition to his readers
"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom"
He has told them what they are doing wrong, and why it is wrong
He has reminded them that God's standards for ethical behavior are high
But here he reminds them that God's law gives freedom
Being obedient to God's heart for treating others as yourself brings freedom, not judgment

Application: Today's passage is a reminder about a sin that grows out of our fallen human nature—a draw toward wealth and status, a desire to be near it. We are all subject to desiring the things of this world, and many (most?) of us have likely been given an opportunity to indulge this desire. What James teaches here is definitely meant for us today as much as to the 1st Century church. Look at this section as an encouragement to examine the patterns of your life and the thoughts that develop that pattern. Where you find yourself showing favoritism or partiality or prejudice, replace it with love for all people, and especially the brethren, who we are called to love "as ourselves".

Prayer: Father God, we ask for the Holy Spirit to help us see everyone on this earth through Your eyes, to see them as You see them—with compassion, with mercy, without partiality or favoritism or prejudice. Help us to examine ourselves to see if we are harboring any of these perspectives so we can begin replacing them. In Jesus' name, Amen.