

SESSION THREE

Living without Social Gain (*James 2:1-13*)

“Cast off all bonds of prejudice and custom, and let the love of Christ, which is in you, have free course to run out in all conceivable schemes and methods of labour for the souls of men.” ~ Catherine Booth

I. Overview

The theme for this portion of James’ letter centers around the topic of favoritism. True faith places no value on the social distinctions of the world. Verses 2 through 4 will provide an illustration of the problem of favoritism. James then provides three reasons for his warning against discrimination: (1) it is inconsistent with God’s choice of the poor; (2) it is inconsistent with the conduct of the rich; and (3) it is inconsistent with the law of love. He then concludes this section by arguing that Christians must act in ways which are consistent with those who have received God’s mercy and have understood the imminent judgment of God that is yet to come.

II. The Content

A. Overview: A Warning Against Favoritism (v. 1)

The Greek term for “favoritism” literally means to receive someone according to their face. The term describes the judging of someone based on external appearances.

“*of glory*” - This phrase can be translated two different ways: (1) descriptive or qualitative, that is, “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 2:8), or (2) appositional, so that Christ is equated with the glory of God, “our Lord Jesus Christ, the Glory”.

Leviticus 19:15 - “You must not deal unjustly in judgment, you must neither show partiality to the poor, nor honor the rich. You must judge your fellow citizen fairly.”

B. An Illustration of the Problem with Favoritism (vv. 2-4)

v. 2 - “wearing a gold ring” - Literally “gold fingers,” this term symbolizes wealth, status, and power. The first-century Roman philosopher Seneca mocked the fashions of rich Roman men: “With a delicate soft gait we sing our steps high—we do not walk, we strut. We adorn our fingers with rings; a gem is arranged on every joint.” (*Natural Questions* 7.31.2).

“poor” - The Greek term speaks of the most severe forms of poverty, implying one who is destitute (cf. C. L. Blomberg and M. J. Kamell, *James*, 108). Certainly the description of the clothing evokes revulsion. If they must participate in the assembly, then the “poor” must know their place.

v. 3 - Notice that the problem is first observed in the speaking (contrary to 1:19 - “slow to speak”).

v. 4 - The Greek word rendered for “discriminate” is synonymous with the translation of the word “doubt” in 1:6. To discriminate according to wealth is to mix worldly values with heavenly ones, or to “waver” in one’s standards. McCartney writes, “Just as doubt undermines faith, so too does discrimination on the basis of worldly wealth or any other source of class distinction.” (*James*, 140).

Unlike some earthly judges, God’s judgments are impartial—offering authentic justice (cf. Deut 10:17; 2 Chron 19:7).

C. A Rationale for the Problem of Favoritism (vv. 5-11)

1. God’s Choice of the Poor (vv. 5-6a)

v. 5 - The Greek grammatical construction assumes a positive answer—“Yes, God has chosen the poor in worldly things to be rich in faith!” (cf. Matt 5:3; Lk 6:20). “God is on the side of the poor, not because they are poor but because they are responsive to him . . .” (Andria, “James,” 1512). Faith, not poverty, is the key to the inheritance of the kingdom.

James’ theology is in keeping with the rest of biblical teaching. Note the following verses:

Proverbs 17:5 - “The one who mocks the poor insults his Creator . . .”.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 -

2. The Behavior of the Rich (vv. 6b-7)

Advancement in a Greco-Roman world was through benefaction, a system whereby a politically powerful and wealthy individual would be “patron” to dependents. It was a system laced with favoritism.

v. 6 - “oppress” — This is the same term used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt (e.g., Exod 1:13).

One commentator aptly notes, “James’s first reason for not showing favoritism, especially to the rich, is that the rich perennially have been against God and his people and have demonstrated themselves to be against Christ and His church.” (Baker, “James,” 51).

3. The Requirements of the Law of Love (vv. 8-11)

v. 8 - The “royal law” and the “law of liberty” in 2:12 recalls the “perfect law of liberty” in 1:25. The “royal law” is summarized in the command to love (cf. Lev 19:19; Matt 22:39).

v. 9 - No matter how well we attempt to disguise our catering to the rich and powerful as “love,” we stand convicted of showing favoritism. It is what one commentator calls “the self-delusion of selective obedience” (McCartney, *James*, 148).

w. 10-11 - Any violation of the law is a violation of the character of God (cf. Matt 5:19).

“James’s point here is not that showing favoritism is as ‘bad’ as murder, but 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. We cannot excuse the sin of favoritism by pointing to the rest of the good we do. Sin is not simply balanced against good—it must be confessed and forgiven.” (Barton, Veerman, and Wilson, *James*, 53).

Favoritism disregards the character of God, denies the eschatological reality of the gospel, and disobeys a direct command from God.

D. A Proper Response to Favoritism (w. 12-13)

v. 13 - “mercy” - This Greek is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for loyal or covenantal love. This same love that God shows to His people is what He expects us to show others.

Mercy for those who show mercy is reflected in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us.”

“triumph over” - The context of this term elsewhere speaks of boasting (cf. Rom 11:18). Mercy possesses greater power and glory than judgement, similar to “love covering a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

III. Intersect

Kent Hughes writes, “The beauty of James’ practical, moral approach to faith is that it cuts through all the religious words and rhetoric.” (*James*, 103). Real faith does more than avoid the “big” sins, such as murder and adultery. Genuine faith affects how we treat people, especially those on the margins of society (e.g., needy, mentally challenged, minority).

To whom do you need to show mercy this week, rather than prejudice, indifference, or resentment? How can you treat that person with mercy?

“He that demands mercy, and shows none, ruins the bridge over which he himself is to pass.” ~ Thomas Adams