

# INTRODUCTION

Please turn to James chapter 2.

## Illustrative story...

As you may or may not know, I work in various group homes taking care of individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities. Now, the company that I work for is religious and so part of my job includes taking individuals to churches. Now in my entire year of work, for various reasons, I have never actually had to take any individuals to church. *But*, I often do hear much about these trips from my coworkers.

Countless times from countless coworkers I've heard a common theme regarding these trips to churches—most every congregation is very neglectful of our individuals. I can imagine it. Various “normal” regular attenders show up, are greeted by greeters and friends, make conversation with one another, etc. meanwhile our disabled individuals and their caretakers are neglected.

And let me tell you, this neglect isn't taken as something simply neutral or passive. In contrast to the way everyone else is treated, it's seen as mean, cruel, dishonoring discrimination.

## The situation portrayed in James 2:2-4...

### Transition:

This is very much like the situation James presents to us here in 2:2-4.

### Contextual setting (1:19-2:26):

Sandwiched in between James' instruction about not only hearing but doing the word in 1:19-27 and in his instruction about living out one's faith in 2:14-26, appears 2:1-13, another real life example of the genuine religion of which James is speaking.

In chapter 1 he said, do the word, make your religion genuine, namely by taking care of others in need—by loving them. In chapter 2 we read

of James' instruction regarding genuine faith, of which he provides the example again of helping and loving others. Here in 2:1-13, James is saying that an example of real and pure religion—doing the word and living out one's faith—is being impartial, not showing favoritism.

### **The situation (2:1-4):**

Let's read verse 1-4:

<sup>1</sup> My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. <sup>2</sup> For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, <sup>2</sup> and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," <sup>4</sup> have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? (NASB)

James draws up this hypothetical situation that assumes similar problems existed among his audience.

### **The setting:**

Now, there's a ton of scholarly debate as to what *setting* James is referring to here.

Because James' says, "*Your* assembly," some think that James is talking about a church gathering, a worship service.

Others, due to the fact that James talks about judging, believe James is speaking of a specific "church court" type gathering, kind of like when Paul tells the Corinthians to judge and handle matters amongst themselves rather than going to secular court.

And to make matters more interesting, the word your translation translated "meeting" or "assembly" is actually the Greek word for "synagogue." In fact, throughout the first two centuries there were some Christian authors that transferred this term over and used it to refer in a general sense to Christian gatherings.

But ultimately, I am not sure if we can definitively know what this gathering was. In fact, James might not have a specific setting in mind. And either way James' point is unaffected.

**The problem:**

So James says, "let's say two guys walk into your assembly. One of them is rich and he looks the part. The other is poor," and we can imagine him looking somewhat like a hobo or homeless person.

He says, "if you give special attention, that is look at with favor, have special regard for the rich (i.e., you seat him in a place of honor) and not only disregard but dishonor the poor man by making him sit lower than the stool your feet sit on—wow, you're making absolutely sinful distinctions; you're showing partiality.

**Description of partiality...****Transition:**

And so James condemns this partiality. But this brings up the question: what exactly is partiality. We must not get confused about what he's referring to here.

**What partiality isn't:**

First, he's not promoting the popular, contemporary idea of tolerance—that we shouldn't condemn what the Bible calls sin because that's not open-minded to what others believe.

He's not telling us we should be pluralistic and saying that all religions are essentially the same and all roads lead to earthly and eternal bliss. The Bible is clear that only Christ is the way. And so likewise, James isn't saying that we should throw out theological boundaries, because scripture is clear that we are to have nothing to do with false teachers.

He's also not telling us to abandon all distinctions. For example, Paul says in Gal 3:28 that in Christ there is no longer male or female but we also recognize Paul's teachings in Ephesians 5 about the distinct roles of the husband and wife and the instructions in 1 Timothy 2 regarding women in ministry.

He's not saying that we shouldn't judge. Jesus said we are not to judge hypocritically (Mt 7:1-5) and by appearance (John 7:24), but in John 7:24 he did said, "judge with right judgment." And so James of course is not saying we should abandon all judging, for example, the practice of church discipline. He's not suggesting we throw out all discernment either. For example, in 1 Timothy 3 Paul tells us that if a man desires to be an overseer, the church must discern whether or not he is qualified.

**Transition:**

So realizing that the partiality James speaks of is none of those things, we ask, what is it?

**What it is:**

Multiple translations can help us here. Various English translations translate this idea as "favoritism" (NASB, HCSB, NIV), "partiality" (ESV, RSV), respect of persons (ASV, YLT, KJV), "prejudice" (NET), favoring some people over others (NLT), or as James says, honoring some and dishonoring others.

Literally, the word in verse 1 means "receiving the face," that is, to make judgments on people based on external appearance or criteria, human judgments and standards.

In verse 4 James identifies it as making distinctions that are guided by evil thoughts. On the opposite spectrum, it's that which scripture tells us is never found in God (Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25).

Ultimately, James is telling us that partiality is essentially inconsistent with genuine religion—the practical manifestations of a genuine faith. Throughout this book James teaches that genuine faith gives practical definition to our entire lives—the way we live, speak, and behave—

including how we treat others, for example, being impartial or partial to others. James says, “do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism” because the two, faith and partiality, are spiritually inconsistent. To hold them together is to be double-minded.

## The practical and personal relevance...

### Transition:

And so, when we look at these portraits of partiality—for example the situation James presents or the situation with my mentally handicapped friends—I would assume that we would all find them both absolutely repulsive. We think, “that’s terrible.” As Christians, it’s obvious to us that showing such discriminating partiality is evil. And so mentally or intellectually, that is regarding our opinion of this sort of behavior, we are almost always right on track. We’re not going to say, “Oh yeah, partiality—that’s where it’s at!” Of course not.

But I think the fact that James goes on to present reasons why we shouldn’t be partial says something about our nature.

Although we may condemn the *idea* of partiality, we have a much harder time transcending that truth into the practical sphere.

We have an easy time overlooking and excusing it. The application—don’t be partial—is blatant to us. It’s a “no duh.” But on a practical level, partiality’s sinfulness is much less apparent to us. It’s easily excused and even more easily overlooked.

### Examples:

Allow me to fly through a list of example areas in which we can fall prey to showing partiality to visitors or our own church members.

For example, we might show partial distinctions based on...

- Economic status (i.e., rich, poor, jobless, middle-class).

- Appearances.
- Whether one is a well-known individual (i.e., politicians).
- Gender.
- Age – Rather young, middle-aged, elderly.
- Health (i.e., healthy, sick, disabled individuals).
- Educational level/intelligence.
- Political preferences.
- Race/ethnicity.
- Culture: big differences (i.e., immigrants) or smaller differences (i.e., small town, rural, big cities, suburbia, etc.)
- Illegal immigrants.
- Time of conversion (i.e. recent convert).
- Amount of time they've been at our church.
- Religious background (Churches background, non-churches/secular background, different denominations).
- Those from rough backgrounds or sinful lifestyles.
- Those who are apart of our church and those who are visitors.
- Those in our care groups.
- Those who are our closer friends.
- Personalities (i.e., bold, quiet, outlandish).
- Hobbies (i.e., sports teams, activities).
- Abilities (i.e., those with music abilities, speaking abilities).
- Those who are most like us (i.e., have kids, same age, from same area, like the same things).
- Relationship status (i.e., married, single, dating, separated, divorced, single mom, widowed).
- Personal preferences (i.e., Bible versions, music, dress, etc.)

**Transition:**

All of these are areas in which we can easily fall prey to partiality.

And so we can't just breeze right on by James words. What I'm trying to suggest to you is that we fall into this way more often than we may realize or want to admit. And I think James knows that, which is why he presents us with *two broad reasons* why we shouldn't show partiality, why we shouldn't discriminate.

## REASONS (2)

### 1 | It doesn't make sense...

#### Transition:

James' first reason is that showing favoritism just simply doesn't make any sense. Partiality is just plain stupid. And he provides two sub-reasons to support this, the first being a theological reason and the second, pragmatic.

So first, the theological reason why partiality doesn't make any sense—

#### A | Theological:

##### Stated:

James tells his audience not to show sinful partiality because it is inconsistent with God's regard for the poor, as seen in His electing them to be heirs of the kingdom. Or said more simply, it's inconsistent to show disfavor to those to whom our God has shown favor.

##### Scripture:

Let's start reading in verse 5,

<sup>5</sup> Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? <sup>6</sup> But you have dishonored the poor man. ... (NASB)

##### Explanation

James says that those to whom his audience was showing *disfavor* were those on whom God had lavished unconditional favor (grace).

Case and point, God had elected them:

As Paul says in Ephesians 1, before the foundation of the world and according to God's loving will, He chose and predestined believers to be adopted through Christ.

Or in Romans 9, Paul says that God chose to save Jacob, not based on anything Jacob had done or willed, but on God's merciful purpose to save.

And so James identifies the object to which these people were chosen—to be rich in faith and heirs of God's kingdom.

These poor weren't rich by worldly standards, but were made rich in regards to faith.

They weren't heirs of anything substantial, but now they will inherit God's kingdom.

But now this brings up the question, what is meant by God's electing the poor—that He hasn't elected the rich?

Some like to soften this up and explain this away by saying that it is the *spiritually* poor that God is electing. However, I think the context demands that James is actually referring to literal poor people. But either way, every one of us apart from Christ is spiritually poor, so the *idea* is still true.

But I think we need to note that James doesn't say that God has *only* elected the poor, that he hasn't elected any of the rich, or that God has elected *all* the poor simply because they are poor.

But I do think that James is tapping on a theological truth here: God's special regard for the poor in election.



As Jesus said in Luke 6:20, *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”*

Or as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2, *“<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”*

And so James’ point is that God has special regard for the poor, and therefore, for James audience to disregard them didn’t make any sense. They are manifesting an attitude contrary to God’s. James’ point simply said—favoritism doesn’t hold up theologically.

## A | Pragmatic:

### Transition:

But secondly, it doesn’t even hold up on a pragmatic level.

### Scripture:

In verses 6 and 7 we read,

*<sup>6</sup> ...Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? <sup>7</sup> Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? (NASB)*

### Stated:

Pragmatically, it made no sense for James’ audience to show special favoritism to the rich.

### Explanation:

First, the rich were oppressing them and dragging them into court.

These rich individuals were probably using their financial power to suppress people like those in James' audience in order to gain more and more financial power. And their taking people to court could very well be connected to all of this. Maybe they were forcing people to take loans at ridiculously high interest rates, like "loan sharks" do today, and were bringing them to court when they couldn't pay up.

But also James says that these rich blaspheme the name of Christ.

Now the NASB as well as some other translations say that the rich blaspheme the name *by* which you were called. But a more literal translation of this verse would read, "Don't they blaspheme the good name *that was called over you?*"

In this case, James' words are most likely then a reference to the practice of baptizing individuals in the name of Christ as seen throughout the book of Acts (2:38; 8:16; 10:48). The HCSB incorporates this interpretation into its translation of this verse which reads, "Don't they blaspheme the noble name that was pronounced over you at your baptism?"

So, however it was manifesting itself—maybe they were mocking the Christian ordinance of baptism or maybe they ridiculed what they thought was the worship of a "dead Messiah" or some bizarre "Jewish cult"—they were blaspheming the name of Christ. And in light of that, it made no sense to show favoritism toward them.

### **Application:**

#### **Transition:**

And so James' first reason why we shouldn't be partial is because it just doesn't make any sense, both theologically and pragmatically. And this isn't simply true for James' audience, but also for the favoritism that we often practice.

**Examples:**

For example, to show partiality to any unbeliever that enters our doors is contrary to our evangelistic efforts.

And to show partiality to fellow believers makes no sense either.

It is contrary to the fact the God has shown favor on us all in saving us.

It is contrary to the spiritual equality we have in Christ. All of our reasons for discrimination are lost in our union with Christ.

And finally, it's contrary to this church's healthy function as a body. No one is dispensable. Everyone is needed for our corporate edification. And therefore, we can't regard some "body parts" as more essential than others.

## **2 | Because you yourself need mercy...**

**Transition/stated:**

But now as we enter the final six verses we read of James' second reason against partiality—we are sinners who need mercy.

**Verse 8 and 9:**

Let's read verse 8 and 9:

<sup>8</sup> If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well. <sup>9</sup> But if you show partiality, you are committing sin *and* are convicted by the law as transgressors.

James brings up the law, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

This law is, "according to the Scripture," that is specifically Leviticus 19:18.

Jesus called this law the greatest commandment, second only to the command to love God. Paul referred to this law as the law which summed up all laws (Gal 5:14) and that by obeying it one fulfills the entire law (Rom 13:8-10). As such, James calls it the “royal law.” It’s the supreme law, the law which governs and sums up all laws.

And so James rightly says, if you are obeying this law, you are doing well.

But of course James is speaking hypothetically, for none of us could ever come close to fulfilling this law in all of its implications. Even if we “don’t do unto others what we wouldn’t want done to ourselves,” we certainly have never even come close to loving our fellow humans to the same degree with which we love ourselves—case and point, James says, is our sin of partiality.

And seeing that this law is a law that governs, sums up, and entails all laws, if we even fail at one point, we have not fulfilled this law at all and are therefore guilty of the whole thing.

### **Transition:**

And in verses 10-11, James says, such is the nature of the law.

### **Verses 10-11:**

In verses 10-11 James says,

<sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all. <sup>11</sup> For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

In other words, the law can’t be dissected. Every individual law is connected to the law as a whole.

Why is this the case?

Notice James’ words in verse 11—“For *He who said*.” The connection between the laws is rooted in their common lawgiver.

As Douglass Moo states, “the individual commandments are part and parcel of one indivisible whole, because they reflect the will of the one Lawgiver. To violate a commandment is to disobey God himself and render a person guilty before him.”

And so when we commit any sin, such as partiality, we are guilty of the whole law. And therefore, we are in desperate need of mercy.

### Verse 12-13:

#### Transition/scripture:

So what’s James’ conclusion? Let’s read verse 12 and 13:

<sup>12</sup> So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by *the* law of liberty. <sup>13</sup> For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

#### Explanation:

James presents both a positive and a negative motivation.

For the negative He warns us, in the context that we are guilty of the whole law, that judgment will be merciless to the one who is merciless. Or as Jesus said in Matthew 5:7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” Consequently, we ought to show mercy to others, namely, by not being partial but showing favoritism to all.

But positively, James motivates us to be impartial by telling us that genuine believers will be shown mercy.

He says we will be judged by a law of liberty. That phrase, “law of liberty” implies liberation from something, and that something in this context is obviously our guilt.

So because we will be shown mercy at the judgment, James says, we ought to act and speak mercifully to others, namely, by not being partial. Act and speak in an impartial manner.

In light of all this, James concludes, mercy triumphs over judgment, mercy is superior to judgment, showing mercy is better than showing partial judgment.

## **CONCLUSION**

And so to recap what we've learned: We ought not to be partial, and James gives us two reasons why.

First, because it's stupid. It's doesn't make any sense, both theologically and pragmatically, both on a spiritual level and a practical level, if you will.

And secondly, because of who we are—sinners who desperately need mercy ourselves. Because we need mercy we ought to readily show it to others in the form of impartiality.