

November 29 Lesson 13 (NIV)

IMPARTIAL LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Matthew 12:1–8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2

JAMES 2:1–13

¹ My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

KEY VERSE

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? —James 2:5

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

Unit 3: Godly Love Among Believers

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON OUTLINE

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 - A Special Football Camp*
 - B. Case Study (vv. 2–4)
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HOW TO SAY IT

Galilee*Gal-uh-lee.*

Jerusalem*Juh-roo-suh-lem.*

Leviticus*Leh-vit-ih-kus.*

Messiah*Meh-sigh-uh.*

Nazareth*Naz-uh-reth.*

Introduction

A. Discrimination

A long-standing view among many people of various faiths holds that wealth is a sign of God's blessing. We reason (even if subconsciously) that if God is showing favor to this person, we should honor that person also. On the other hand, poverty is a sign of God's withholding his favor,

perhaps even of God's curse. We reason that if people are suffering from poverty, their relationship with God must be negative, and we should not accommodate them.

Nowhere is this erroneous belief seen more clearly than in prosperity gospel preaching and teaching. Simply put, ministers of this false doctrine teach that healing and wealth can both be yours ... if you have enough faith, which is shown through how much money you give to the church. This often results in the ministers themselves becoming wealthy while their congregants wait for miracles of health and wealth that never seem to show up. The ministers are afforded great honor and position while many people suffer. But *should* wealthy members receive more attention and have more influence than members with little money? Are the wealthy *really* more beloved by God?

B. Lesson Context

James described himself as a "servant of ... the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1). This author could have made a bolder claim, however, for he was the half brother of Jesus. Everyone in their hometown of Nazareth assumed they were natural brothers, two out of five: Jesus, James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon (Mark 6:3). The order the brothers are listed in implies that James was the second oldest of the brothers and would have become the family head after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The boys grew up together in a faithful Jewish household in rural Galilee. They both learned the carpenter's trade in their father's workshop and studied and worshipped in the village synagogue.

Although James did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah during Jesus' ministry (John 7:5), a dramatic change occurred after the resurrection, following an encounter with the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:7). Acts tells us that the brothers of Jesus (including James) were part of the earliest fellowship in Jerusalem that became the church (Acts 1:14). James became a leader in the Jerusalem church (15:13).

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that James was very familiar with Jesus' teachings. He echoes the oral instruction of Jesus with confidence that his own teaching is true to Jesus' original intent.

The epistle of James reflects a very early stage in the development of the church, when it was composed primarily of Jewish Christians. The congregation he is addressing in the letter seems to be made up entirely of Jewish believers in Christ. So, for example, James could easily reference Jewish customs or laws without needing to explain himself to his audience (see James 2:8–11, below). His audience would have been familiar with the value of the Jewish law for ethical guidance, while understanding its inadequacy for salvation by faith in Christ.

I. Favoring the Wealthy

(JAMES 2:1–4)

A. Attitude of Jesus (v. 1)

1. My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

Following the assertion that religion God desires from his people requires caring for the afflicted and pursuing holiness (James 1:27), James transitioned to a discussion about *favoritism*. This biased treatment can be seen when we treat one person better than others. It can also be seen in prejudice, in which we treat a person worse than others. Note that James does not seem concerned about whether a person deserves better or worse treatment.

James exhorted his audience to be faithful in following the example *of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ* in the ways they interact with others. Doing so requires knowing how Jesus interacted with others. Because Jesus is God, Christians can look at God's own attributes and know what Jesus is like, and vice versa. So if God does not practice favoritism (Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25), we know that Jesus also does not show favoritism.

Paul also used the idea of impartiality toward others in several ways. It served as an assumption for his famous speech in Athens, where he claimed that all human beings are the offspring of one man and one God (Acts 17:24–28). Peter, too, with an initial animosity toward Gentiles, also came to understand that God wants to welcome all people into his family (10:34–35; see 15:7), allowing Peter to evangelize and baptize Cornelius and his household (10:44–48).

B. Case Study (vv. 2–4)

2–3. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,”

James offered a hypothetical situation to illustrate why showing *special attention* to one person over another is unfitting for Christians. What if during your weekly *meeting* as a church, two visitors appeared? One wears expensive, sparkling-clean *clothes* and flaunts his wealth by *wearing* an expensive *gold ring*. The other one wears *filthy*, ragged clothes and has no jewelry.

James suggested the man with the appearance of wealth would be escorted to a comfortable *seat* where he could hear and see everything in the service. The man who seems poor would be told to *sit on the floor* or *stand* in the back. These behaviors would seem natural in a boardroom or restaurant perhaps, but in the church, this hypothetical situation should make us feel very uneasy.

4. have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Because this scenario would not be surprising in many settings, it is not hard to imagine that such a thing could happen in a church assembly. James's two-part rhetorical question leaves no wiggle room to justify the behavior he described. Such actions reveal partiality in the fellowship. Anyone who participated in that partiality is a judge whose *evil thoughts* run counter to what God desires.

The Greek word translated *thoughts* here has a deeper sense than ideas that simply drift through our brains, quickly dismissed or discarded. It implies a pattern of thinking, a reasoning process (compare Matthew 15:19). Such corrupt reasoning makes it easy to justify one's reasons for sinning against others. In this case, the ungodly thing is to show partiality by discrimination for the wealthy and against the poor.

II. Favoring the Poor

(JAMES 2:5–7)

A. In Faith (v. 5)

5. Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

Throughout the Old Testament, *God* expressed in various ways that he has *chosen those who are poor* (examples: Leviticus 23:22; Zechariah 7:10). Though this may imply that God does not care for the wealthy, that is clearly untrue. We all “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) in God, no matter our socioeconomic status (compare Exodus 23:3). Instead, God’s choosing the poor acknowledges that they require his help in unique ways because their low status disadvantages them.

Even today, we see the wealthy often having better access to education, job opportunities, legal representation, etc. The Lord does not shun or neglect the poor as society often does, but cares for them and expects his people to do the same (examples: Deuteronomy 15:11; Psalm 72:4; Isaiah 25:4).

Because the poor do not possess wealth, James suggested that it is easier for them to be *rich in faith* and trust in God, not worldly riches (contrast 1 Timothy 6:10). As Jesus taught, the poor will *inherit the kingdom* (Luke 6:20; compare Matthew 5:3). They must inherit this kingdom, because they would never have the wealth to purchase it. They would never seize it, because it has been *promised* to them if they truly *love* the Lord. All worldly goods may be stripped away, but no one can prevent anyone from loving God or prevent God from loving that person.

B. Against Oppression (vv. 6–7)

6. But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?

The charge of dishonoring *the poor* implies that the church really was honoring *the rich*. Remember, these were visitors to the assembly, not rich members whose deeds (whether good or bad) were known to the church in general. The only reason they were treated with esteem was a preference for and deference to rich people.

The prophets of the Old Testament frequently summarized the corruption of Israelite society by pointing out how its rulers and rich landowners oppressed others (see Ezekiel 18:12; Zechariah 7:10). This offended the Lord, becoming a primary cause of his judgment (Malachi 3:5). This resulted in the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, destruction of the temple, and deportation of many of the people of Judah to Babylon in 586 BC (2 Chronicles 36:15–21).

The wealthy in James’s society notoriously oppressed the poor and used the corrupt courts to their advantage. Their wealth and their influence made them invincible in controversies with the poor (contrast Luke 18:1–5). Honoring those who so treated others put the church in danger of honoring people just like those God had judged in the exile.

7. Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

The word translated *blaspheming* is elsewhere translated “hurled insults” (Matthew 27:39) and “slandered” (1 Corinthians 4:13). Though it does not always have religious overtones, the Greek word always identifies deep disrespect and contempt. The dishonoring tactics of the rich are an insult to *the noble name*, Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:9–11). Attacking and exploiting poor people, those God has chosen for an extra measure of love and grace, is a grave insult to God himself.

No person should be denied access to the fellowship of believers based on economic status, whether rich, poor, or somewhere in between. At the same time, any societal power structure that facilitates preference for the rich and disrespect of the poor should not be tolerated within the church. Since we *belong* to Jesus, we should act as he did when it comes to avoiding “favoritism” (James 2:1).

III. Favoring the Neighbor

(JAMES 2:8–13)

A. Royal Law (vv. 8–11)

8. If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

The designation *royal law* works on two levels. First, this is the “king of laws,” the one that controls and orders all things we should do. Second, this is the “law of the King.” No law that contradicts this one will come from Jesus, and no law will replace it.

This magnificent meta-command comes from *Scripture* as originally delivered by Moses, *Love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18). This command served as the backdrop for Jesus’ teaching on who one was obliged to love as a neighbor (Luke 10:36–37). This law is also found in Paul’s letters (examples: Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14). Only in keeping this law can it be said that *you are doing right*.

The royal law is the overriding ethic applicable in any situation. We should always act with love for others. When we have an opportunity to show God’s love to others, we must do so. If we violate this law, we are certainly guilty of violating others. If we keep the law of love, however, we cover a multitude of other sins (see 1 Peter 4:8).

9. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

Showing *favoritism* (see commentary on James 2:1, above) violates the intent of the royal *law* and is therefore sinful. Showing preference for the rich and dishonoring the poor reveals us as *lawbreakers*.

10–11. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

The *law* was a package, not a pick-and-choose buffet of options. To be in compliance meant 100 percent blamelessness. One violation made a person a breaker of *the whole law*. The standard is not comparative (“I keep the law better than my brother”), but absolute (“I keep the law perfectly”). A murderer who avoids committing *adultery* still violates the entire law.

James was not interested in every obscure commandment in the law of Moses or trying to bind such things upon Jewish Christian believers. Perfect adherence to the Jewish laws was not a means of salvation apart from faith in Christ. Jesus both taught and lived the ethic that we should love our neighbors, regardless of economic standing. James's point to any self-satisfied readers was for them to correct their neglect of the direct teachings of Jesus. They could not reflexively disregard the poor and honor the rich and claim to keep Jesus' own law.

B. Law of Liberty (vv. 12–13)

12. Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,

The law that gives freedom is the other foundational ethic that runs throughout this chapter: love frees us to keep God's commands rather than constraining us with the commands. In other words, instead of trying to prevent us from destructive actions, it encourages us to act in life-affirming ways, ultimately beneficial for us and for other involved parties. It is freeing to have relationships within the church not based on social status. It is liberating not to focus on ourselves and instead care for the poor, the elderly, the ill, and the mistreated of our society. Our faith in Jesus makes us "free indeed" (John 8:36).

This law frees us from the discrimination our society encourages but that God does not tolerate. Freedom for our souls comes when we stop judging others on the basis of wealth, education, social status, family connections, race, or age. The true seeker of Jesus should find a welcoming fellowship in the church, no matter what.

13. because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Jesus, in teaching the Lord's Prayer, warned that if we withhold forgiveness, we should not expect God's forgiveness (Matthew 6:14–15). This is not some bargain we make with God, as though God will be nice to us if we are nice to others. It is a test of one's heart. In the same way, if we fail to show *mercy*, we await *judgment without mercy*.

Discrimination, prejudice, and partiality are all types of judging others. When we favor a rich person because of her wealth and disfavor a poor person because of his poverty, we make moral judgments without mercy. James wants mercy to win this battle. He wants mercy to win out in our lives and to be shown in the way we treat others. In this way, mercy will overrule judgment.

Conclusion

A. Two Laws

Over 1,900 years ago, James gave definitive answers for how the church should live and behave. James offered these two ethical foundations—the royal law and the law of liberty—to guide the church. Both of these were learned from his half brother, Jesus.

These two laws go together. If we see others as our neighbors in need—whether they are beloved friends or reviled enemies—we must show mercy, not discrimination. If we set aside our natural impulse to favor certain visitors, we will find unexpected opportunities to share the love that wells up in our hearts. We should lead with love, never doubting God's willingness to show kindness to us.

Churches should practice self-examination using these complementary laws. What things do we do that favor certain people over others? Do our church leaders represent the diversity of our church body, or are they predominately well-off financially, well-educated, and of a certain ethnicity that does not represent the whole? Is our congregation known as a loving place or a judgmental place? Does our community recognize us as people who take them seriously? Our answers to these questions will help us see as a congregation how we measure up to the standard of the two laws.

Jesus did not treat people according to divisions of wealth or poverty, or perceived blessings or curses. James, his brother, did not either. Instead, James and Jesus show that God loves the poor, and we should too. This issue has not gone away in the nearly 2,000 years since James wrote, and we do well to listen to him today.

B. Prayer

Father God, you created all people. You did not create us to discriminate and hate, but to love and accept others. You have loved us without partiality. May we love you in return and show this as we love others who cross our paths. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Begin with love.¹
