

Week 5: The Sin of Partiality

The Place of the Passage

At the beginning of [James 2](#), the author turns to address a particular failing among his readers in their doing of the word. Far from being a people characterized by a genuine love and concern for the helpless ([James 1:27](#)), they have actually fallen into showing partiality to the rich and powerful. James is appalled by this behavior—first, because it is so diametrically opposed to God’s character; second, because it puts these Christians in the position of acting just like the ungodly world; and third, because it is a violation of our King’s law! These believers’ behavior is no small issue. It puts them at odds with God’s law, and therefore with God himself.

The Big Picture

In their relationships with other people, Christians ought to be driven by a set of values and principles—in a word, love—that is radically different from the world.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, [James 2:1–13](#). Then review the listed passages and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 2393–2394, available online at www.esvbible.org.)

Preferring the Wealthy over the Poor ([James 2:1–4](#))

Read [James 2:1–4](#). What is the particular problem that James is addressing among these believers?

Why do you think these believers would act in this way? Why would they show partiality to the rich and powerful?

What does James want his readers to do instead of showing partiality to the rich and powerful? Does he want them to show partiality to the poor? Read [James 2:1](#) carefully!

Why does James think it is so bad to make “distinctions among yourselves?” Read [Ephesians 4:1–3](#) and [1 Peter 3:8](#) before you answer.

Do you remember James’s teaching in [James 1:6–8](#) about “doubting?” The word “doubt” there meant something like “self-disputing,” or being divided against oneself, turned against oneself. Well, the word “distinctions” here in [James 2:4](#) is the same word. How does that idea of being divided and turned against oneself help you understand why it is so bad to have such “distinctions” created in the church?

Three Reasons Why Showing Partiality Is Ungodly ([James 2:5–13](#))

In [James 2:5](#), the author gives the first of three reasons for why showing partiality to the rich and powerful is wrong. It is, simply, that to do so is utterly unlike God! While these Christians are genuflecting before the rich and powerful, James says, God has chosen to give the gifts of faith and the kingdom to those who are poor in the world’s eyes. In fact, God has a long history in the Old Testament of showing special care and concern for the poor. Can you find some passages in the Old Testament that show this?

Think more about God's special concern for the poor, shown in the Old Testament. Why does he do this? Read [Psalm 10:12–14](#). You see? It is those who are helpless to whom God shows special concern—those who are marked by a recognition that they cannot help themselves. And throughout Scripture, poverty tends toward that kind of humility more than wealth does. In the same way, sickness tends toward humility more than health. That's why Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" ([Matt. 9:12](#)). Can you see in your own life how wealth, health, or other strengths lead you to rely on those things rather than on God? Explain how that works in your experience. Explain, too, how weaknesses lead you to humbly lean on God.

Is James saying here that being materially poor automatically results in salvation? Look carefully at [James 2:5](#). To whom has God promised the kingdom? To "those who have little money"?

In [James 2:8–9](#), the author gives a third reason why showing partiality to the rich and powerful is wrong: It is a violation of the King's law. The word "royal" is important in understanding which body of law James is referring to. It is not the Old Testament law in itself, but rather the Old Testament law as interpreted and fulfilled by King Jesus. That's what makes the law royal; it belongs to the King! Can you think of some Scriptures where Jesus claims the right to interpret the Old Testament law—that is, to say what it actually means?

James says that the royal law accords with the commandment "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In other words, that commandment encapsulates and sums up the law that King Jesus gives to his people. Why does James choose that particular commandment as the "summing up" one? Does he pick it at random out of all the commandments Jesus gives, or does Jesus himself give it some special status? (Hint: read [Matthew 22:36–40](#).)

In [James 2:10–11](#), why is it true that breaking one commandment of the law makes a person accountable for the whole law?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to reflect on the Personal Implications these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

THE KINGDOM PROMISED TO THOSE WHO LOVE HIM. James is sometimes accused of not understanding the gospel, and of believing that salvation is granted to those who are poor simply by virtue of their being poor. It really would be hard to misunderstand James any more! We've already seen that James understands very well that salvation comes "by the word of truth" ([James 1:18](#)), and now here in [James 2:5](#) he says that the kingdom is promised to those who love God. It is not poverty itself that secures salvation; it is faith and trust in God through Christ—though James recognizes that material poverty can sometimes lead to that kind of humility more easily than can material wealth.

RICH IN FAITH. James is also accused sometimes of disparaging the importance of faith. We will consider that idea more in the next section, but even here in [James 2:5](#), we see that James understands well the importance of faith. We are to be rich in it!

MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT. In [James 2:13](#), the author appeals to the mercy God has shown to us in order to motivate our own obedience. Salvation, once again, is not a matter of doing enough to earn God's favor. It is a matter of his mercy in Christ. He does not give us what we deserve for our sin. Because of that, our own lives should be marked by mercy as well. As we interact with people, our sinful hearts inevitably desire to judge and create divisions, to separate and push away. But mercy, James exhorts, should triumph over judgment, just as it did in our own case before God.

Salvation: Deliverance from the eternal consequences of sin. Jesus' death and resurrection purchased eternal salvation for believers ([Rom. 1:16](#)).

Whole-Bible Connections

THE LORD OF GLORY. James tells his readers in [James 2:1](#) that Jesus Christ is "the Lord of Glory." Paul uses the same title for him in [1 Corinthians 2:8](#). Glory is an important term in the Old Testament, for it characterizes God himself. When God spoke to Israel out of the fire on Mount Sinai, Moses said, "Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire" ([Deut. 5:24](#)). The Psalms repeatedly refer to "the God of glory." All this makes it nothing short of amazing that the early Christians could say something like, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" ([John 1:14](#)). By applying the title "Lord of glory" to Jesus, James is likewise strongly affirming his divinity.

THE ROYAL LAW. In [Matthew 5](#), Jesus claimed to have the right to interpret God's law—that is, to say what it meant. The symbolism there is striking. Just as Moses went up on a mountain to receive the law that God would give, so Jesus stands on a mountain to deliver his Sermon on the Mount. He is the divine Lawgiver, and he alone has the right to interpret the law. James recognizes this in his phrase "the royal law." He is not referring to the Old Testament law as such, but rather to that law as interpreted and fulfilled by King Jesus.

Theological Soundings

ACT AS THOSE WHO ARE TO BE JUDGED. Christians do not live in fear that they will be condemned by God. After all, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" ([Rom. 8:1](#)). Nevertheless, the Bible promises that Christians will give an account of their lives at the final judgment ([1 Cor. 3:12–15](#); [2 Cor. 5:10](#)). This need not create anxiety in the hearts of believers, for Christ's righteousness covers all our failures. But the reality of the inevitable final judgment is sobering for us all, and also heartening in that it assures us that all wrongs will be made right someday.

THE LAW OF LIBERTY. One of the main blessings of being a Christian is that it brings freedom from the law. That does not mean that Christians do not live under a law at all. On the contrary, as James affirms, we live under the royal law of King Jesus. But there is something fascinating about that law: it is a law of liberty, not of slavery. As Paul says in [Galatians 5:1](#), "Christ has set us free!" What he means is that we no longer relate to the law as slaves, obeying it out of fear of punishment. Rather, we relate to our King's royal law as heirs and sons, obeying it out of love for the King himself and a desire to live lives that will honor him. Our obedience is not one of slavery, but one of freedom!

Judgment: Any assessment of something or someone, especially moral assessment. The Bible also speaks of a final day of judgment when Christ returns, when all those who have refused to repent will be judged and condemned ([Rev. 20:11–15](#)).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of [James 2:1–13](#) for your own life today. Take note of the personal implications for your walk with the Lord in light of (1) the Gospel Glimpses, (2) the Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. [James 2:1–13](#)

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you engage in this study of James. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and to take note of things to review again in the future.