



INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday, July 2, 1776 our founding fathers declared, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that **all men are created equal**, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Our Declaration of Independence was approved by Congress on Thursday, July 4, 1776. It was authored by a five person committee including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman. Some 56 men would sign the document on Friday, August 2, 1776, to ratify our independence as a nation. America's forefathers believed that the equality of man before God was a self-evident truth. They were compelled to place the truth in iron ink because they also understood the age old battle of discrimination, prejudice, and favoritism would continue to be fought in the New World.

While discrimination may not be a new battle, it is one of the great social tensions of our times. People frequently band together in an effort to exclude others from enjoying their special privileges. Sometimes discrimination is based on race or color. Other instances reflect a favoritism arising from differences in religion, gender, age, wealth, or culture. Such unkind conduct may not be too surprising in a world where selfishness and the protection of one's own interests are the guiding principles. However, a higher standard is expected from those who profess the faith in Christ. Our Christian creed must be followed by Christian conduct. Martin Luther would say, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing."

In the second major section of this manual of hands-on Christianity, James deals with the nitty-gritty of Christian life. He will address the issues of partiality and prejudice. James is asking, "If you say you believe like you should, why do you live like you shouldn't?" He forces us to face our favoritism.

Sunday can be the most segregated and discriminated day of the week. Monday through Friday we work together, shop together, learn together, commute together, and eat together. Saturday we relax, play, and laugh

together. Then Sunday rolls around, and we go our separate ways often refusing to worship together.

Transition: Real faith in God always impacts our whole life. It affects our attitude toward Him, others, ourselves, and life in general. In chapter 2 of his letter, James points out some uncomfortable areas, forcing us to face our prejudices. James is not writing to people in general. It is specifically to followers of Jesus, who because of their faith in Him are called to a higher level of behavior. Like an expert communicator, James will give clear exhortation, illustration, argumentation, and application to remove discrimination.

1. The Exhortation to Remove Favoritism (2:1)

Labels are found in more places than on soup cans. We put them on people all the time. Funny or dull, smart or thickheaded, friendly or cold. There are all kinds of ways we can categorize people. And our categories can have a profound influence on the way we treat people. Weirsbach writes, "The way we behave toward people indicates what we really believe about God!" Favoritism is giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group at the expense of another. This is something we have all been guilty of at one time or another. It is human nature to show favoritism but that does not make it right.

The phrase *respect of persons* literally means "to receive a face". It carries the idea of "a biased judgment based on external circumstances such as rank, wealth, or race, disregarding the intrinsic merit of the person involved" (Wolfe). James uses a negative command to require the cessation of such practices by believers. Christians must not accept or reject persons on the basis of partiality, being impressed by position, wealth, looks, race, or any other superficial distinction. God is no respecter of persons (Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:8; Col. 3:25)! He judges the truth of a matter by the heart, not the face (1 Pet. 1:17). As Christians, we are to reflect this quality in our lives.

It is imperative that we must understand the difference between discrimination and discernment. James is not questioning the importance of wise character study to discern whether we should really be involved with a person (Matt. 7:20). We should all exercise that kind of discernment. James is addressing the problem of prejudice, a judgment made prior to any careful discernment.

There is nothing that can hurt the Kingdom of God and the work of the Christ more than snobbishness in a church. Where we look up or down on others because of their economic status, their attire, their appearance, ethnicity, or background. When we jump to conclusions by outward appearance, we are guilty of the sin of favoritism ("respect of persons"). The human tendency is to flatter those we "like" and gossip against those we "dislike". You understand

the difference between gossip and flattery? Flattery is where we say to someone's face what we don't say behind their back, and gossip is where we say behind someone's back what we don't say to their face. Both are wrong! Flattering the rich and cultured or criticizing the poor and down and out are both wrong in the sight of God.

Application: Too many believers draw a quick conclusion about people based on merely external first impressions. Prejudice is making a prejudgment of someone, causing us to form an opinion before knowing all the facts. We might think, "his hair is too long; her skirt is too short; that tattoo is atrocious; their house is too big; their car is too expensive; he has a PhD; she never graduated high school; they attend public school; they home-school". Faith in Christ and partiality are incompatible. Faith and favoritism are complete opposites. Real faith removes discriminations.

Transition: The exhortation is "stop showing favoritism". But James doesn't just give his readers a principle or rule to follow; he tells them a story to help them relate. Like a window that floods the room with light, he will shine this truth into our minds through vivid illustration. Like his half-brother, James was a master-illustrator.

2. The Illustration of Favoritism (2:2-4)

A hypothetical case study of two men who enter a place of meeting and worship as guests is given. Someone had to greet them and show them where to sit or stand. While hypothetically stated, the illustration suggests a situation that the readers would immediately recognize and strike their conscience. As one preacher put it, "this is the strange case of the snooty usher".

a. The rich man

The first man is rich, we recognize this from his clothing and jewelry. He is dressed to the nines and adorned with "a gold ring". The phrase literally reads "gold-fingered". So, we will call this first man, Mr. Goldfinger. His ring signified his upper class status and power. In fact, the term does not just suggest one ring but rather a finger laden with gold rings. In that day rings were the same kind of visible status symbols that cars function as today. They were an ostentatious sign of wealth. There were even shops in Rome where rings could be rented for a special occasion (like the commercial where the man rents a luxury car to attend his high school reunion giving the appearance of prosperity). Mr. Goldfinger has a gem at every joint, and a nugget at every knuckle. The "gay clothing" speaks of fabric that is bright, shiny, and glittering. Perhaps, he is wearing the finest Armani suit, with a crisp starched shirt, pristine tie, and highly polished, gleaming shoes. The greeters and ushers

think, "This is someone important". So a path is cleared for the distinguished guest, and he is given a premium seat down front. All this was out of respect for his seeming importance and wealth.

Illustration: Even today, there are some who attend church simply to see and be seen. A woman asked her husband arriving home after church, "Say, did you notice the hat Mrs. Jones had on this morning?" He said, "No, I didn't notice that." She said, "Well, did you notice Mrs. Smith's new dress?" He said, "No, I didn't notice that." "Well," she said, "What good does it do you to go to church? You never get anything out of it."

Often people attach their self-worth to their net-worth. They define themselves by their things and often spend their lives trying to accumulate more. Our inclination is to gather all the material things we can in order to feel secure and confident; however, this may prevent us from finding security and confidence in our relationship with Christ. External wealth is only temporary. The only true kind of wealth is internal, and internal wealth comes from faith in God alone.

b. The poor man

Another guest arrives at the worship meeting. His appearance is very much the opposite of the last fellow. He is called a "poor man", and he is wearing "vile raiment". Now, this phrase *vile raiment*, means "dirty or filthy clothes." The poor man is not wearing the "proper attire" for worship. Instead he has on dirty, smelly clothes. Perhaps this man was a common day-laborer, a working man, and he didn't have a chance really to bathe and freshen up. Maybe he's just come to church from the fields, and maybe he's got dirt under his fingernails. Maybe his shoes are not shined. It is possible that James is picturing one of the many beggars of that day. There is no doubt he is painting a drastic contrast for his readers. Just as the rich man stood out for his opulence, this man was outstanding in his poverty.

When the ushers and greeters see him, they have little time to make a decision and no time to think. Under the impression that this man is not worth very much, he is told to stand over there or sit down here. While the rich man received a VIP welcome and the seat of honor, the poor man doesn't even get a seat. Instead, the usher points to an empty place on the floor and instructs the poor man to go sit over there. In other words, "Stay out of the way, you don't belong here!"

God does not determine a person's value by their economic status, social status, or nationality. He does not accept or reject them based on their career, appearance, or church affiliation. What God desires is that all people be in

relationship with Him – a relationship that is found only through Jesus Christ. We should see others through the eyes of Jesus, who crossed many social and ethnic boundaries of His day.

May we never forget that every man is someone for whom Jesus died. Never judge a jewel because it comes in a plain box. Every man's soul is invaluable and of inestimable worth. Jesus reminded His audience that a man's soul is worth more than the whole world (Matt. 16:26). When we treat others in such a discriminatory way it not only crushes the spirit of that person, wounding them deeply, but it causes great damage to the cause of Christ.

Illustration: Mahatma Gandhi, the great leader of India, was searching for a philosophy, for some way to reach the people of India for whom he had a burden. He studied the different faiths, and the different ideologies and religions of the world, he even studied Christianity. After his careful search and study he concluded that Christianity was what the people of India needed most. One Sunday he went to a church to learn more. An usher met him at the door of the church, and when the usher saw him and saw who he was, the usher said, "I'm sorry, sir, this church is for Europeans only." Mahatma Gandhi went away turning his back on that church and Christianity forever. He became the Hindu leader of India, which has led multiplied millions of souls into darkness. Perhaps if those at the church would have looked at his heart instead of "laying hold of his face" the outcome would have been drastically different.

In 2:4, James announces his verdict with a rhetorical question, "are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?" James found the snooty usher to be guilty of discrimination. He was partial (literally "made a distinction") and became a judge not with objective clarity, but with "evil thoughts" (motives). If a judge in a court of law were to let his decision be swayed by superficial matters rather than by essential facts, it would be a gross miscarriage of justice. It is equally wrong for Christians to base their treatment of other human beings on such superficial matters as economic, social, or racial differences. This kind of prejudice is sin. And if there is one place where class distinctions should be broken down, it's in our places of worship. Discrimination over color, political persuasion, financial status, fashion, or appearance doesn't belong in the church!

Application: In our church, do the poor feel welcomed? Do the rich? How closely does our congregation reflect the socioeconomic and racial neighborhood in which we gather? Personally, how do you react when someone comes into church wearing sloppy clothes, unkempt hair, and body odor? Favoritism, indulgence of the rich and indifference to the poor, is an all too common problem within the church. Is there anyone that you look down

on or avoid? In what specific ways could you reach out to one such person, do a favor for him or her, or do some other kindness? Bring these ideas to God and make a commitment about which one you will follow up on.

Transition: James has exhorted as a Christian brother, he has illustrated as master story teller, now he will argue as a lawyer. He gives three air tight arguments against favoritism.

3. The Argumentation against Favoritism (2:5-11)

We have shifted into low gear and are about to hear why prejudice and partiality are unfit for Christians. Using the address of a forceful and dramatic speaker, James urges his readers to listen to him. He will give three arguments, two through rhetorical questions, and a third through dogmatic declaration.

a. The theological argument (2:5)

The first argument can be summarized this way, God shows no partiality, so neither should His children. In fact, Jesus' first followers were common people. Christianity has a special message for the poor that in Christ are "hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). Jesus would say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). Abraham Lincoln once said, "God must love the common people because he made so many of them".

The poor are those who have little money and those whose simple values are despised by an affluent society like ours. Being poor does not automatically grant eternal life anymore than being rich condemns someone. Salvation is given anyone who will repent of their sin and believe on Christ alone (Mk. 1:15). However, the poor are usually more aware of the powerlessness and it is often easier for them to acknowledge their need for salvation. Great riches can stand in the way of a person recognizing their need of God. We see this illustrated during Jesus earthly ministry when we read that the "common people heard him gladly" (Mk. 12:37), while the rich young ruler "went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions" (Matt. 19:22).

James's argument is simple. By recognizing God's non-discrimination against the poor as a class, he argues theologically that we shouldn't either. For it is man that looks on the outward appearance, but "the LORD looketh on the heart" (I Sam.16:7). Through Christ, the poor of this world are "rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom" (2:5). God has honored the poor, but the sort of favoritism some Christian readers were showing was in stark contrast to God's action.

b. The logical argument (2:6-7)

Scripture commands believers to “honor all men” (1 Pet. 2:17). By showing partiality to the rich, they had “despised” (literally *dishonored*) the poor. They had not treated them as God would treat them. James reminds his audience that favoritism toward the rich is strange in light of the treatment they had received from many of their wealthy neighbors. The rich had *oppressed* (exploited) them. This word means to take advantage of someone and to use him or her selfishly for one’s own purposes. In that day, the rich and powerful were Sadducees, and they were among the first to persecute Christians. The rich showed no mercy or concern for the poor, and wealthy moneylenders often took advantage of the less fortunate. Showing favoritism to those who oppressed them made no logical sense. Indiscriminately showing favoritism toward the rich and mistreating the poor made no sense at all.

Furthermore, it was the rich as a class that had been the most powerful and effective opponents of the gospel. They had vehemently denied that Jesus was the Messiah, thus blaspheming His name (2:7). James is not denouncing wealth per se as evil. Neither is he advocating reverse discrimination, whereby the poor are favored over the rich. He was logically arguing against favoritism of any kind.

c. The biblical argument (2:8-10)

James termed the law “royal” because it was the obligation of those who are heirs of the kingdom, and it emanates from the King (2:8). It also rules all other laws (Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:14). Leviticus 19:18 is being quoted, “thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”. This law is the summation of one’s duty to his fellow man which derived from man’s first duty to God. It is the basis for the Golden Rule (“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). We are to show favor to everyone, whether the person is rich or poor. We are to practice kindness. Our attitudes and actions toward others should be guided by love.

Showing favoritism is not a minor transgression or an unfortunate oversight; according to James, it is sin, and those engaged in this action are law breakers (2:9). Partiality does not fulfill God’s royal law. Discrimination against anyone, whether on the basis of dress, race, social status, wealth, or gender is a clear violation of the royal law of love.

Furthermore, James argues that because of the unity of the Law, transgressing just one point constitutes one as a lawbreaker (2:10). To sin even in one instance makes one guilty of breaking the whole law. Violating God’s will at any point means the offender has disobeyed God’s intention. We cannot excuse the sin of favoritism by pointing to the rest of the good we do. Sin is not

simply balanced against good. “A person may observe all the laws of health, but if he inhales one whiff of poison, he may die; so we may be outwardly obedient to the entire Decalogue, but delinquency in love will invalidate everything” (F.B. Meyer).

Keeping the some of the laws does not excuse a person for breaking others. One becomes a criminal by committing just one crime. To break out one corner of a window pane is to become guilty of breaking the whole pane. The individual who crosses a forbidden boundary at one point or another is guilty of having crossed the boundary. So the sin of favoritism is not to be taken lightly nor excused on the basis of some ultimate good that might result. Given the fundamental importance of this “royal law”, to break this one law is like breaking all of them; and, vice versa, if you break any of the others, you’ve broken this one. For this reason, prejudice (refusing to love all equally), transgresses the great commandment. To violate any part of the God given Law is an offense against the divine Lawgiver (2:11).

Transition: We have seen the exhortation – “stop showing favoritism”. James has illustrated what favoritism looks like and argued against it theologically, logically, and biblically. He concludes his “sermon” with some application points on how to avoid favoritism.

4. The Application to Avoid Favoritism (2:8-13)

As the old adage goes, “birds of a feather flock together.” Many of our churches are filled with people who look the same, think the same, talk the same, and act the same. These same people often have a distrust and dislike for anyone that is different than them. So how do we defeat discrimination? James gives us some practical application to avoid favoritism.

a. Let love be your law (2:8)

The “royal law” (love your neighbor as yourself) is to lead our thinking, speaking, and doing. We must see others as Christ saw them. Those who are fellow believers are our brothers and sisters in Christ, so we should love them for Christ lives in them. Those who are lost are souls that God loves and for whom Christ died, so instead of shunning them we should work to reach them with the gospel because Christ died for them. The auto-focus on our life-lens seems to always revert to self-focus. But as a Christian we are called to “love others as we love ourselves”. As we encounter people that are different than us, instead of running from them, we must run to them with the love of Christ. Weirsbe says, “Christian love means treating others the way God has treated me.”

As followers of Jesus, we should treat every person with dignity and equality. They are people created in the image of God – He values them enough that Christ died for them. God sees discrimination of any kind as sin. He expects us to treat each person with equal respect, regardless of status, wealth, intellectual stability, race, physical appearance, or social acceptability. If we approach each person we meet as an opportunity to demonstrate love, we will make good progress at putting away prejudice from our midst. By letting love be our law, James says we “do well” (2:8).

Only the love of God and His transforming power working in us will erase all the forms of prejudice. If we are willing, the Holy Spirit will soften our hearts with compassion and expand our ability to behave in love toward people around us.

b. Let Scripture be your standard (2:12)

Discrimination and favoritism often stem from holding others to our own standard. We can easily despise those who are different than us. However, Scripture, not culture, feelings, or personal preference, is to be our standard. We cannot excuse the sin of favoritism with phrases like, “I was raised this way” or “it’s always been like this”. We must decide to agree with Scripture and call partiality what it truly is – sin (2:9).

James issues a solemn warning. Christians should always speak and act in view of their own coming judgment (2:12). The phrase “so speak ye, and so do ye” is a comprehensive one that includes all words, deeds, and attitudes. The recognition that believers will ultimately be judged by the “law of liberty” (Scripture) should motivate proper conduct toward other people. James is referencing the judgment seat of Christ where believer’s works will be judged (II Cor. 5:10), and he earnestly calls Christians to examine their lives by the standard of Scripture. Christ holds His followers accountable not only for their faith, but also for their works done in obedience. James is insistent that all of Christian conduct be motivated by the realization of future judgment.

c. Let mercy be your motive (2:13)

Mercy is the outward manifestation of pity and compassion in kindly action toward the misery of another. It looks not at what a man deserves, but what he needs. This is precisely what the believers were not showing when they insulted poor people. We must remember that mercy will be withheld from those who have displayed no mercy. Such refusal to practice mercy will be like a boomerang in the Day of Judgment. Jesus taught, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5:7). This is not saying that we need to be merciful to others in order to earn mercy before God. You cannot earn mercy; it’s mercy precisely because it cannot be earned. James is saying that you can

tell that someone has received God’s mercy because of the way they show mercy to others. If mercy is evident in someone’s life, then clearly Christ, by His mercy, is dwelling in them. But if mercy is not evident in them, then there may be reason to wonder whether they truly belong to God, who is rich in mercy (Eph. 2:4).

Verse 13 ends by stating, “mercy rejoiceth against judgment” (literally *mercy triumphs over judgment*). With this triumphant exclamation, James concludes his discussion on a thoroughly positive note. He is not advocating salvation by works. Rather, he points out that a person will demonstrate his nature by his conduct. Not showing mercy places us only under the judgment of God, but showing mercy places us under God’s mercy as well as His judgment. And, because of God’s character, His mercy triumphs over judgment. Max Lucado writes, “Relationships don’t thrive because the guilty are punished but because the innocent are merciful”. Mercy does not triumph at the expense of justice; the triumph of mercy is based on the atonement wrought at Calvary. The Lord explained that acts of mercy are evidence of the possession of Christ, Who produces this fruit in lives (Matt. 25:34-40). Real faith is seen through acts of grace and mercy toward others. Real faith expresses itself through love, it removes discrimination.

Conclusion: One of the traits of real faith is that it treats others without partiality. This passage allows no wiggle room for ambiguity – favoritism is sin. It is sin because it is based on prejudice, judging others by false standards. Prejudice and favoritism flourish when we stop looking at people the way God looks at them. This also means that we have stopped seeing ourselves as God sees us. We need to ask God to help us identify our prejudices and recognize situations in which we tend to show favoritism. Then we need to actively resist these tendencies, asking others to keep us accountable. Let love be your law, Scripture be your standard, and mercy be your motive. Real faith removes partiality.