



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

So You Say You Love Your Neighbor?

James 2:1-13

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Introduction

1. At first glance, James 2 is the opposite of James 1.
 - a. James 1 appears to be a collection of short sayings on various themes: trials; doubt; prayer; the poor and rich; temptation's cause and sin; God's nature; warnings about anger and speech; a call to do, not just hear; and a short definition of true religion.
 - b. James 2 addresses just two subjects: love of neighbor; faith versus works.
2. Closer analysis reveals that the differences are only apparent and that chapter 2 is really an elaboration of a primary theme from chapter 1.
 - a. What does steadfast faith look like in action?
 - b. What does it mean to be doers of the word and not hearers only?
 - c. What will it look like when we show godly concern for the outcasts who have always received God's attention?
3. If James 1:26-27 comprise the first application of 1:19-25's call to be doers of the word, they also establish the direction James intends for that general principle to take in his epistle.
 - a. Verses 26-27 present themes James will elaborate: moral holiness (3:13-4:12), tongue control (3:1-12), and how to do the word in a way that values all (2:1-26).¹
 - b. He begins with a case study of a larger principle: how am I to love my neighbor?

Body

- I. A Common Case.
 - A. We will begin with the case James introduces to illustrate his point.
 1. Whether or not it is hypothetical has been debated.
 - a) The main verbs² and construction in vv. 2, 3 have a hypothetical feel.
 - b) But, the setting (συναγωγὴν, *synagōgēn*, v 2) and direct confrontation of the action (v. 4) give it a feel of a real event.³

¹ The epistle might be divided better at this point if 1:26-27 had been designated the first verses of chapter 2.

² All four are Greek subjunctives: εἰσέλθῃ (*eiselthē*, "comes," twice in v. 2), ἐπιβλέψῃτε (*epiblepsēte*, "pay attention to," v. 3), and εἰπῆτε (*eipēte*, "say," v 3).

³ A separate question is the nature of the συναγωγὴν: a church assembly, Jewish synagogue service, or court room? (For the last, see Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, 109.)

2. Debating whether it really happened can see us miss James's larger point in v. 1: Jesus' followers should not show partiality (προσωπολημψίας, *prosōpolēmpsiais*).
- B. James cites one example of a serious sin that can take many forms, a case that is possible, but one few of us have ever seen as described.
1. We might have seen cases of favoritism (NASB, NIV) in church settings in other ways (some getting their way when others don't, etc.).
 2. Even when we have witnessed or been victims of partiality, we are prone to treat minimize it in *our own* lives, in large part because it doesn't match James's example.
 3. So, we downplay issues of (and tell jokes about) race, nationality, education (snobbery and reverse snobbery), rich and poor (again, cutting both ways), etc.
- II. A Serious Sin.
- A. James labels "partiality" a sin that leaves one convicted by the law as a transgressor.
1. To show partiality is to "work sin" (ἁμαρτίαν ἐργάζεσθε, *hamartian ergazesthe*; v. 9).
 - a) See the verb, κατεργάζομαι, *katergazomai*, in 1:20 and the noun, ἔργον, *ergon*, in 1:4, 25; 2:14, 17-18, 20-22, 24-26; 3:13.
 - b) See also ποιέω, *poieō*, to do or make, in 2:8, 12-13 and the noun, ποιητής, *poiētēs*, doer, in 1:22-23, 25; 4:11.
 2. Partiality is included among things that are opposite of being a doer of the word.
- B. But, verse 9 is not the only direct reference to sinful behavior in the text, just the one that uses the word "sin." To be guilty of partiality is to:
1. Take on the judging role of God (v. 4) (προσωπολημψία; v. 1) is found elsewhere in the NT only of God who is *not* partial — Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25).
 2. Dishonor (ἠτιμάσατε, *ētimasate*) the poor man (v. 6), the one God has said will inherit the kingdom (v. 5) and has always favored (cf. Deut. 10:16-19; *et. al.*).
 3. Side with the rich, who were oppressing the Christians, dragging them into court, and blaspheming the name by which they had been called (vv. 6-7).
- C. James goes beyond statements of specific sins to show why partiality is sinful.
1. Partiality misunderstands the priorities of God (vv. 5-7).
 - a) In James's example, it is folly to defer to the rich because "God has chosen those who are poor ..." (v. 5).
 - b) As we saw, to favor the rich over the poor was to take the side of an enemy of God, one who was blaspheming the Lord's good name (vv. 6-7).
 - c) At the heart of that example is the view that makes partiality sinful.
 - (1) We see it in v. 6's phrase, "you have dishonored the poor man."
 - (2) To show partiality is to devalue another human being created in God's image in order to gain some favor or elevate one's self.
 - (3) Partiality reflects worldliness in the absolute sense: a preference for the way a world in rebellion against God does things over his values.
 2. So, partiality fails to accept the teaching from God about love (vv. 8-13).
 - a) The "royal law"⁴ entails loving your neighbor *as* yourself (Lev. 19:18); that is not happening where partiality is present (v. 8).

⁴ Another much discussed phrase. The reference is likely to the fact that the law is associated with the King.

- b) James reminds us of a fundamental principle of law: you don't have to violate every ordinance to be a lawbreaker (vv. 9-10).⁵
- c) Significantly, he singles out the command against murder.
 - (1) Had some become so frustrated and enraged that they had committed murder? Some think so (cf. 4:2).
 - (2) But, in context it's better to see this as an example of the way James so often echoes the teaching of Jesus, in this case Matt. 5:21-22.
 - (3) The specific example differs, but the principle is the same.
 - (a) The anger Jesus rebukes is paralleled by belittling names (also often found where partiality is present), devaluing another.
 - (b) Specific methods may differ, but partiality does the same thing and thus violates the sixth commandment.
 - (4) It is hard to imagine a more serious sin or condemnation!

III. A Lacking Faith.

- A. Verses 12-13 present two positive motivations for avoiding partiality.
 - 1. Valuing (loving) others as God loves them is liberating and allows us to be judged "under the law of liberty" (v. 12).
 - 2. Remaining impartial lets us imitate the merciful nature of God even as we are beneficiaries of that mercy (v. 13). And mercy has the last word!⁶
- B. But, he has already presented the highest motivation in v. 1.
 - 1. "Have no partiality in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the [Lord] of glory" (literal translation).
 - 2. When we commit the sin of partiality, we do not just violate a law, we debase Jesus' good name (v. 7) and the faith commitment (*the* issue in James) we made.

Conclusion

- 1. It may be that we have been lulled into false security by the sentiment of a common saying we know is not true: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."
- 2. Words *do* hurt – as much when aimed at others as when thrown at us. They hurt because they reflect an attitude that dishonors God by devaluing others who are created in his image.
- 3. Let us resolve to cease the sin of partiality, trusting Jesus to enable us.

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⁵ Davids, 117, notes that "the law is a unity because the lawgiver is one."

⁶ "Triumphs" translates, κατακαυχᾶται (*katakauchatai*), often used in the sense of boasting (cf. Rom. 11:18; Jas. 3:14). See also the root word, καυχάομαι (*kauchaomai*) (Rom. 2:17, 23; 5:2-3, 11; etc.).