

## Unit III: Godly Love among Believers

# A Community of Equals

DEVOTIONAL READING: Matthew 12:1-8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 2

PRINT PASSAGE: James 2:1-13

**Key Verse**—Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? (James 2:5, KJV)

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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, NIV)

### Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Understand the difference between showing partiality and treating others equally.
- Affirm that all people are equally valued and loved by God.
- Practice James's call to fulfill the "royal law" of loving one's neighbor as oneself.

### \*Key Terms

**Dishonored (verse 6)**—Greek: *atimazó* (at-im-ad'-zo): disgraced; treated disgracefully; insulted; "despised" (KJV).

**Favoritism (verse 1)**—Greek: *prosópolémpsia* (pros-o-pol-ape-see'-ah): "respect of persons" (KJV); partiality.

**Mercy (verse 13)**—Greek: *eleos* (el'-eh-os): pity; compassion.

\*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)

### Introduction

*Discrimination* is defined as "the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex" (*New Oxford Dictionary*). In this country, discrimination has been alive and well throughout its history, as minorities, women, and other groups have had to endure racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination in



### The Biblical Context

James, the brother of Jesus, has been identified as the author of the book that bears his name. It is addressed to Jewish Christians of the diaspora. "Diaspora" was usually a description of Israel, God's chosen people, forcibly removed from their homeland or who later left it for commercial reasons. Some scholars interpret his salutation as his way of addressing believers everywhere who had received Jesus as the Christ. James wrote to challenge problems he saw among those scattered throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond. His letter provides practical instructions regarding a number of ethical subjects. He wanted to lead Christians to reject secular values and live a faith that produced outward fruit. For James, the only evidence of a genuine faith was a life of visible integrity and morality. He used his position as a leader of the Jerusalem church to boldly address the issues challenging the faith of his readers. One of these was the temptation to show partiality and favoritism.

several forms. Among these is showing partiality and favoritism toward those considered to be racially, ethnically, or economically superior. Depending on which "side of the tracks" you are from, you are either "in" or "out." Discrimination is not confined to society in general but can be found within and among congregations that make up the community of faith. Some among the various Christian denominations consider their way of interpreting God's Word as superior to others and separate themselves from those who do not adhere to their specific interpretations and practices. Discrimination also shows up as a generational divide between senior adults and youth. Worship has fallen victim to discrimination based on people's preference for "traditional music" or "contemporary music" styles. The practice of discrimination in any form is clearly a violation of the teaching of God's Word, especially when directed toward those who are identified as economically poor. In the Old Testament, the Law forbade judges from discriminating between the rich and the poor based on their appearance and commanded impartial treatment and meeting their needs (see Exodus 22:22; 23:6, 11; Leviticus 19:10, 15; Deuteronomy 10:18). Jesus also taught the

special place of honor the poor have in God's kingdom (Matthew 19:21; 20:46-47). Writing to Jews scattered around the world, James addressed a situation concerning discrimination and partiality and pointed his readers back to the purpose of the Law as requiring equality and impartiality rather than discrimination and partiality.

## ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

### The Problem (*James 2:1-4*)

#### KJV

**MY BRETHREN, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with *respect of persons*.**

**2 For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment;**

**3 And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:**

**4 Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?**

## **NIV**

**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?**

There are specific temptations and trials that confront all believers. James addresses at some length one of the strongest of these—showing partiality or favoritism—in this section of his letter. He directly charges believers, those who truly have faith in Jesus Christ, to refuse to show partiality or favoritism (**verse 1**). Acknowledging Christ as Lord places every believer on the same level before Him. As Lord, every believer bows before Him as a servant or slave. James understood the purpose of the Law regarding partiality and knew that it was strictly forbidden (see Leviticus 19:15; Job 13:10; 1 Timothy 5:21; Proverbs 24:23). He supported his condemnation of this attitude by describing a hypothetical situation, one that could very well be a reality among believers today (**verses 2-3**). Picture two unbelievers visiting the church. One is so sharply dressed that it is obvious that he is a rich man. The other visitor is shabbily dressed in grimy, torn clothes. The congregation goes out of its way to ensure that the rich man is made to feel welcome and directs him to the best seat in the sanctuary. And the poor man? Just any seat will do because his presence is as an embarrassment and not an apparent benefit to the ministry. The problem is not the economic status of these visitors but the difference in how they were received and treated based on preferential judgment of their outward appearances. The two represent the extreme opposite ends of wealth and poverty. James's point is that if partiality is forbidden in this scenario, it should never be shown in any other among believers. Showing partiality places one in the position of a judge of men in place of God, the only one who has the right and the authority to judge (**verse 4**). Partiality also shows a worldly mindset ("evil thoughts"). Focusing on the accumulation and abundance of material things is corrupt because it diverts attitudes and thoughts from the spiritual things that have lasting value. This kind of focus demonstrates spiritual immaturity and sin against God's command to show love and concern for the poor.

**Q What Do You Think?** What are some specific examples of Christians' showing partiality both openly and subtly?

## **A Study in Contrasts** (*James 2:5-7*)

### **KJV**

5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

6 But ye have *despised* the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?

7 Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?

### **NIV**

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?

The attitude of those favoring the rich was in direct contrast to God's (**verse 5**). It is the poor in this world He has chosen to be rich in faith and to become heirs of and co-rulers with Christ in His kingdom. The poor often prize what is most important and lasting: hope in the Gospel. The rich, in general, often place their hope in their possessions rather than in Christ, the source of all temporal and eternal riches. James continues his contrast in attitudes by reminding his readers that they were actually favoring those who were the cause of their current persecution (**verse 6**). They were being deprived of their right to practice their faith without fear by the rich, the very ones they were favoring. The elite of society had made the decision that Christians were not as good as other people, had denied Christ, and had persecuted Christians for following Him (**verse 7**). When believers despise the poor, they are guilty of behaving like the unsaved rich and blaspheme Christ's name. God's grace does not allow for the option of relating to or placing merit upon people based on social status or ethnicity. Christ's substitutionary death on the Cross broke down the walls that separate people. The challenge to the community of faith is to refuse to allow them to be rebuilt by practicing partiality and favoritism.

**Q What Do You Think?** How would you rate your local congregation regarding their equal or equitable treatment of people?

## Violating God's Law (*James 2:8-13*)

### KJV

8 If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well:

9 But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.

10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

11 For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

12 So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.

13 For he shall have judgment without *mercy*, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

### NIV

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.

Showing partiality is sin because it violates the royal law of love (**verse 8-9**). There are two reasons for why loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is identified as the royal law. One is because love is the summation of all of God's laws (see Matthew 22:27-40). Another is because of the Author of the law. God is at once creator, sustainer, and sovereign ruler of the universe. Therefore, this and all His laws are royal and are to be obeyed because He gave them. You recall that the demonstration of love for others was taught by Christ to be the identifying characteristic of His followers and proof that they exclusively belong to Him. If his readers were actually doing this, they were in good standing with God. If not, they were committing sin and transgressing the whole Law (**verse 10**). James warned his readers of the danger of selective obedience. We cannot choose the commandments we want to follow or decide how we want to obey them. Partial disobedience is total disobedience in God's sight. The one guilty of showing partiality is just as guilty

as an adulterer or a murderer (**verse 11**). Partiality is a serious sin because it can lead to other sins that treat people as if they do not matter because of preconceived prejudices and stereotypes. All of the divine Law must be accepted as God's will for His people. James climaxes this segment by reminding believers that favoritism will be judged by God. Just as they were guilty of passing judgment on others, the day would come when they would face His judgment themselves. The remedy was to speak and act in view of the coming judgment (**verse 12**). **Verse 13** contrasts the attitude of showing mercy and refusing to show mercy to others. God will judge us reciprocally according to which of the two we have done. This is not a works-based warning. We cannot earn mercy by showing mercy. What it does show us is that a merciful attitude gives evidence of the presence of Christ within us and produces confidence of nothing to fear on the Day of Judgment. We are called to live our faith by refusing to show partiality and favoritism and to love others as He has commanded us.

**❓ What Do You Think?** What attitudes can cause believers to think that showing favoritism is not sin?

## A Closing Thought


Because of the Cross all believers are on level ground in their standing with Christ. Showing no partiality or favoritism at all is God's standard for our relationship with others, no matter who they are. We must remember that one of the tests of the genuineness of our faith is how we treat others. How we live our doctrine is more important than knowing it.

## Your Life

The focus of this lesson is a timely reminder of the absolute necessity of practicing God's Word. The transparent believer will realize that he or she has often missed the mark when it comes to being impartial and nonjudgmental in the treatment of others. The standard and consequence of failing to obey the royal law are clear and are not optional. Prayerfully reflect on your pattern of treatment of others this week. Confess your failure to be consistently impartial and seek the aid of the Holy Spirit to help you develop a more merciful spirit toward others.

## Your World!

A world that does not know God is expected to practice discrimination and partiality based on appearance, race, ethnicity, gender, economics, and multiple other variables. Unfortunately, these evils have infiltrated the community of faith. This is abnormal behavior for Christ's followers and requires refocusing our priorities from knowing to doing. Partiality must be recognized for what it is—sin against God's Law; it must be confessed and replaced by loving and serving others without regard to who they are. This is the test of genuine faith. Do we pass or fail?

 **Closing Prayer** Precious Lord, we confess our failure to treat others impartially and to accept them openly without regard to who they are and where they come from. Help us to act and speak like Your children in our relationships with others and bring glory to Your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## Conclusion

### (Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

The importance of one's fulfilling his or her calling is the main thrust of next week's lesson. The Background Scriptures are Hebrews 1; Matthew 1:1-17; and the Print Passages are Hebrews 1:1-5; Matthew 1:1-6, 16-17.

### Home Daily Bible Readings

<b>MONDAY</b> , November 30	"God's Anointed Ruler of All Nations"	(Psalm 2)
<b>TUESDAY</b> , December 1	"Blessed and Chosen in Christ"	(Ephesians 1:1-14)
<b>WEDNESDAY</b> , December 2	"Christ, Head over All People/Things"	(Ephesians 1:15-23)
<b>THURSDAY</b> , December 3	"In the Family Line of David"	(Matthew 1:6b-15)
<b>FRIDAY</b> , December 4	"God Anoints Jesus as King"	(Hebrews 1:6-9)
<b>SATURDAY</b> , December 5	"Jesus, Creator and Eternal Ruler"	(Hebrews 1:10-14)
<b>SUNDAY</b> , December 6	"Expectations of Jesus Before His Birth"	(Hebrews 1:1-5; Matthew 1:1-6, 16-17)

## Notes