

## MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT

James 2:1-13

Key Verse: 13, "...judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Thus far James has told us Christians how to overcome trials and temptations with a right attitude of joy, persevering faith, and prayer. James also exhorted us Christians to be not only hearers of God's word but doers of it. True religion is to watch our words, to help the helpless, and to avoid the world's corruption.

In today's passage James admonishes us not to show favoritism. We will think about this passage in three parts: First, What is favoritism? (1-4) Second, Why must we not practice favoritism? (5-7) Third, What must we do instead of showing favoritism? (8-13)

### I. What is favoritism? (1-4)

Look at verse 1, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism." This could also be a good key verse for this passage. What is favoritism? Some translations use the word "partiality" or "respector of persons." This does not mean we should not show respect to people. On the contrary, the Bible tells us to respect our parents, to respect the elderly, wives to respect their husbands, husbands to respect their wives, and slaves to respect their masters and vice versa (which would apply to bosses and employees in our society). The Bible even says we are to reply to people who ask questions about our faith with gentleness and respect. So when some Bible translations tells us not to be a "respector of persons," this does not mean to show disrespect. Listen to what 1 Peter 2:17 says, "Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor." So if someone says, "I don't respect anyone," that is in opposition to what the Bible teaches about showing proper respect to all people.

Favoritism on the other hand is to show respect to some people and disrespect to others according to our own assumptions. Favoritism is to pass judgment on people purely based on their appearance. One Greek lexicon defines the word here for favoritism as follows: "the fault of one who when called on to give judgment has respect of the outward circumstances of man and not to their intrinsic merits, and so prefers, as the more worthy, one who is rich, high born or powerful to another who does not have these qualities." In other words, it is to judge a person's character or worth simply by how they look, such as, what kind of clothes they wear.

In fact, James gives that example in verses 2-4: "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. <sup>3</sup> 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," <sup>4</sup> have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" Here, James uses

three actions that describe favoritism: “showing special attention,” “discriminating,” and, “judging.” In this specific example, the person wearing fancy clothes and jewelry is shown special honor while the poorly dressed person is treated poorly, like a nobody or an unimportant person.

In contrast to this, the Old Testament had a law warning about reverse discrimination: that is, to show partiality in favor of the poor against the rich in a lawsuit case. Leviticus 19:15 says, “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great but judge your neighbor fairly.”

So James used the example of a person’s clothes. Actually, there are many ways that people judge a person or show favoritism besides what they are wearing (or not wearing)—other status symbols. Maybe it’s the kind of car they drive, or the house or the neighborhood that they live in, or even their hairstyle or color of hair. It is very easy to assume things or judge people based on these things. Or how about tattoos or body piercings or painted fingernails? There are other ways that we can show partiality or favoritism or judge others, such as: how they talk, how much education they have, whether they have a spouse or not, who they are married to, a person’s occupation or unemployment. The point is: we easily pass judgment on people or show partiality or favoritism based on these things, without even knowing anything about someone, without knowing the content of their character, without spending much time with them to get to know them.

Now that we’ve considered what showing favoritism or partiality is, we can ask: Why do people show favoritism? It seems that we show favoritism when we make a judgment regarding someone who we think will be beneficial to or boost the reputation of ourselves or our community. If the person appears that they will not benefit us or our community, then we despise or shun or even block them from our community. This doesn’t mean we should accept without reservation or condition a person whom we know has a criminal record or who is actively living an abusive or sexually immoral or drug-influenced lifestyle. Helping such people requires wisdom, experience and necessary boundaries. It could require hearing the testimony of close acquaintances, such as relatives, workmates, supervisors, teachers or pastors. This is why people need reliable recommendations from such people and background checks when they apply for a job.

What are some ways we might show favoritism? Maybe we show a bias to whom we decide to share the gospel with, or to invite to church or Bible study, or simply to show kindness to. Maybe it’s based on past experiences with people who look similar to certain people, or because they just look too different from you.

Now that we’ve thought about what favoritism is and why people show favoritism, we need to ask: why is favoritism wrong?

II. Why must we not practice favoritism? (5-7)

James has already strong clues to answer this question in verse 1. He says, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism." First, he calls Christians "my brothers and sisters." We all have one Father in heaven, and we are all brothers and sisters. This is especially true of Christians. Christians are one in the family of God. So we must not show favoritism among brothers and sisters in Christ. And in a broader sense, God is the Creator of all people, who have all been made in the image of God, worthy of equal love, dignity and honor.

The other clue in verse 1 is the phrase "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." Jesus Christ is the Lord of glory. Why is that significant in light of showing favoritism? I can think of two biblically sound reasons. First of all, Jesus is Lord of all and he is the only just Judge. The Bible says, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Jesus knows all and sees all, even the thoughts and motives of our hearts. Jesus is also without sin. So Jesus' judgment is right. We, on the other hand, are sinful and we don't see peoples' hearts, motives and intentions. We usually don't even remember exactly what people have done or said. In fact, most of the time when people argue you almost always hear the words: "I never said that!" or, "That's a lie!" But Jesus knows everything we've said and done and even our thoughts. So our judgments are faulty and imperfect. Since we only see partially, we are not qualified to make right and fair judgments. God is the only truly righteous Judge. So we should not try to sit in God's judgment seat. This reminds us of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. <sup>2</sup> For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Mt 7:1-2).

The second reason that James might have appealed to our glorious Lord Jesus Christ is that Jesus did not show favoritism. Jesus is our perfect example of how to live and speak and treat people. Jesus did not despise beggars or lepers or prostitutes or tax collectors, even though they were all despised as low-lives in Jesus' time. Rather, Jesus showed them love and compassion. Jesus saw them with hope. When Jesus called Levi the tax collector to follow him and then had dinner at his house, Jesus was criticized by the religious leaders. On hearing these criticisms, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt 9:12-13).

Now look at James' argument in verses 5-7. "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? <sup>6</sup> 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? <sup>7</sup> Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?"

In these verses, James compares the poor and the rich. Poor people who are rich in faith are blessed. Rich people who dishonor the poor, exploit people and drag them into court, and who blaspheme God's name are headed for big trouble in God's eyes. Now we know that not all

poor people are rich in faith and not all rich people are wicked and godless. But what is true is that needy people tend to cry out and depend on God more than rich people, since rich people have all they need. In other words, rich people often don't think they need to pray or listen to God. This may be why Jesus said it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. He also said no one can serve both God and Money. We'll hear more on that later in the book of James. Generally, people with power, position and wealth cling to what they have with no intention of giving it up. This is why one rich young ruler was not willing to accept Jesus' call to sell everything and follow Jesus.

James says that God has chosen those who are poor in the world's eyes but who love God to be rich in faith and to inherit the promised kingdom. God does not show favoritism. The Jews thought that God favored them because of their heritage as children of Abraham; so they despised the Gentiles. Even Jesus' disciples had this prejudice. But God showed Peter through a vision to kill and eat some unclean animals that God does not show favoritism. God accepts people from any nation who fear him and do what is right. And through Peter, God brought a Roman centurion named Cornelius the gospel message by which he could believe and be saved (Acts 10).

So, we learned what favoritism is and why we should not show favoritism—because only God is qualified to judge and Jesus did not show favoritism to even the most despised people. Then what should we do?

### III. Love and show mercy (8-13)

As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ we are to do two things, and they are related: love and show mercy. Look at verses 8-11. "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right.<sup>9</sup> But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.<sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.<sup>11</sup> 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."

James mentions the "royal law": "Love your neighbor as yourself," which comes from Leviticus 19:18. Most famously, Jesus called this royal law the second greatest commandment. The first is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." Apostle Paul wrote regarding the royal law: "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Rom 13:9). Again, Paul wrote, "For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14). The gospel law of love sets us free.

We may take pride in the fact that we've never murdered anyone or slept with someone else's spouse. But don't forget that Jesus said anger or contempt for a brother or sister is murder in your heart, and looking lustfully at others is adultery in your heart. James adds that showing

favoritism is sin and breaking God's law. Oh my! Who will rescue us from our multitude of sins? Does anyone feel they need a Savior after hearing these standards? Who will rescue us from our mountain of sins? Does anyone want to cry out for mercy? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Run to the Savior! Cling to the Savior, whose blood is mighty to save and cleanse us!

And this is the final point of this passage on showing favoritism. Not only must we love our neighbors as ourselves. Not only must we keep the Golden Rule: to do to others as we would want them to do to us. In addition to these, we must be merciful. Look at verses 12-13, "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,<sup>13</sup> because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Mt 5:7). What is mercy? Mercy is "not receiving the judgment we rightfully deserve." We should be judged, but we are rather pardoned. We have already seen that we are guilty sinners who have broken the laws of God too many times to count. Based on God's laws, even just the Ten Commandments, we cannot stand before God's righteous and holy judgment. Paul wrote in Romans 3:20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law, we become conscious of our sin."

Mercy triumphs over judgment. But judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. We already talked about how showing favoritism is playing the judge. The problem with playing the judge is that it means we are showing no mercy. For some reason, it is in our sinful human nature to want to play the judge. We think we are better than the one we are judging.

There is a moving scene with a strong point in the movie "The Shack." Let me say I don't agree with all the theology of the book or movie. In this scene, a grieving, angry father has a meeting with Wisdom, who is seated on a throne. Wisdom calls the angry father to come and judge, but he refuses. Wisdom says, "You must." Wisdom knows that he hates his father, who had been abusive to him. Wisdom shows him a boy who was abused by his father. Then Wisdom asks, "Would you judge this boy?" He answers, "Of course not." Wisdom says, "You already have. That boy was your father when he was young." This understanding gave the man the heart to forgive his father—to show him mercy. He did not condone or justify the evil his father had done. He only showed mercy and forgiveness, and his relationship was healed.

I want to share with you a powerful story of Christian mercy. Botham Jean, a black man in Dallas, was shot to death in his own apartment by a white policewoman, Amber Guyger, who said she thought she was entering her own apartment, which was one floor apart. The 26 year old Christian man who was shot and killed had an 18 year old Christian brother who publicly forgave the policewoman at her trial. He even confessed that he loved her and asked if he could give her a hug. Here's 2 minutes of a video clip of the 18 year old's testimony at the trial (1:30-3:25): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flzxl5KfSk>.

Today we learned that Christians must not show favoritism or judge others. Rather, Christians must love and show mercy. We can't do this by our own feeling or strength. We can do this when we remember Jesus' grace and mercy to us personally. Mercy triumphs over judgment. As Christians, we are to keep the royal law: "Love your neighbor as yourself." We are to not show favoritism as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.