

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

¹My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ^a with an attitude of personal favoritism^b. ²For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes^c, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes^d, ³and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes^e, and say, “You sit here in a good place^f,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool^g,” ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges

^a **2:1 My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.** James is not talking about a quality of belief when he speaks of “your faith,” but the religion of Jesus Christ as a whole. This use of “faith” is like the one Jude inserts when he urges his readers to “earnestly contend for *the faith* which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3). The behavior James is about to describe has no place within the boundaries of “the faith.”

^b **2:1 with an attitude of personal favoritism.** “Personal favoritism” may not be the best way to translate this because it is not necessarily wrong to have favorite people. The issue is judging others for morally neutral things beyond their control. Racism and belittling people who seem mentally slow are examples of this. These things have no place in the family that will ultimately represent every tribe tongue and nation.

The phrase “an attitude of personal favoritism” comes from one word in the original. It is used in Romans 2:11 to show that God is not a racist. He judges evildoers and rewards the good regardless of people group. The word is used in Ephesians 6:9 to remind masters that God does not esteem them above their slaves. Colossians 3:25 is a warning to slaves not to expect partiality before God if they misbehave. Notice that each of the other times the word is used it is used to describe an attribute of God. God’s judgment is not based on things outside our control.

We should not show preferences for the rich or the poor, but our responsibility is to care for the weakest among us. James is using a principle that is founded on commandments in earlier in Scripture:

You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly. Leviticus 19:15

^c **2:2 if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes.** The word “assembly” is actually “synagogue.” Believers in Christ still met in synagogues in the first century. A gold ring and fine clothes would have been status symbols in a first century assembly, while we take such adornments for granted. Because we are already so rich in our day, we might parallel these things with a Rolex watch or an expensive luxury vehicle.

^d **2:2 and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes.** Most of us could not imagine such poverty. Most of us wear rings. Most of us have an extra set of clothes to wear while our other clothes are being washed.

^e **2:3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes.** The heart issue behind this kind of favoritism is selfishness. We tend to gravitate to people whom we perceive have something to offer us. This is wrong because God has commanded us to take care of the weakest among us (widows, orphans and strangers).

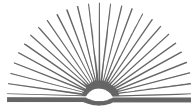
^f **2:3 You sit here in a good place.** Seating arrangement certainly indicated power and importance but it also affected how well an individual could participate in the synagogue service.

^g **2:3 You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool.** Notice the attitude toward the man who apparently has nothing to offer. We are not in a position to decide which people are worthy to hear the word of God.

James 2.1-7
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

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with evil motives^a? ⁵Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him^b? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor man^c. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court^d? ⁷Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called^e?^f

^a 2:4 **have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives.** Your actions reveal your thoughts. Judging itself is not the evil here. Judging one person as more valuable than another is.

^b 2:5 **did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him.** Again we go back to the beatitudes. Jesus spoke of the good side of poverty and hunger when he said the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit and that those who are hungry for righteousness will be filled.

^c 2:6 **you have dishonored the poor man.** If you scold someone by saying, “You just dishonored that person,” you might hear, “So? Is that a crime?” Yes. We have the command to “honor all people” (1 Peter 2:17). That is because people were made in God’s image and we have no business making judgments he does not make. Proverbs 17:5 says, “He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker; He who rejoices at calamity will not go unpunished.”

^d 2:6 **Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court.** James is not engaging in the same prejudice he is trying to combat here. He is merely saying that wealth does not make people virtuous. As an example he points to the way powerful people in his day were using their wealth to persecute believers. We might use the same argument to say that people who hold office are not better than people who do not. We would argue, “Is it not elected officials who have repeatedly refused to stand up for the unborn?” This does not make all elected officials evil. It merely points out that being a public official does not make you more valuable than average citizens.

^e 2:7 **Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called.** To blaspheme is to “speak evil.” A blasphemer is one who lightly regards the name (i.e., the character) of God. This, of course, violates the third commandment. Consider the foul-mouthed characters, particularly in the entertainment industry, who are admired by believers.

^f 2:1-7 There is good cause for a modern Christian to consider the implications today of this first century illustration. Even in a day when Christians were still meeting in “synagogues,” the assembly needed to carry on ministry with an eye toward outsiders—we call them visitors.

Today we might apply this teaching as a command not to over-specialize church ministries. For example, attempting to reach young families may bring excitement to the assembly, but it should not be done to the exclusion of reaching older folks.

Another application is the way we treat those who walk into a service not knowing anyone. One church has an unwritten rule that for three minutes after a service the congregation will speak with no one but visitors instead of immediately gravitating toward their friends and family. Some Christians consider their church loving, meaning that the people who are already committed love each other. This is good, but what do the people say who come into that “loving” church and do not return because the people loved each other so much that they did not have time for “aliens”? Consider the attitudes demanded by this text that will change the way a church looks at others:

1. We exist for God and others. This is God’s vision for the church and individual believers.
2. We already have all we need. This attitude springs from the truth that God is the giver of all good gifts. Coveting springs from the attitude that God has not been good to us.
3. When we dishonor others we dishonor God. The way we treat others affects our relationship with God.

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