

The letter of James deals with very practical problems. In chapter 2 he addresses how Christians sometimes wrongly show personal favoritism. Favoritism is giving special treatment to one person or group over others who have claim to equal treatment. It is not favoritism or partiality to give more help to those who need more help.

Favoritism continues to be a problem in society and even in churches and among Christians. James tells us in this letter what God thinks of that.

1. ***The exhortation (2:1): don't show favoritism.***

James begins with an exhortation. "Do not be holding your faith in Christ along with favoritism." Favoritism is wrong and it is inconsistent with our faith in Jesus. When we claim to be Christian, we claim to have had our lives changed by Jesus. Yet when we show favoritism, we are cheering for the other side. We are not acting as God would act. God does not show favoritism (Romans 2:11; Acts 10:34; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25). So we shouldn't either.

2. ***An illustration and application (2:2-7): It is evil to favor the rich over the poor.***

James described a possible scenario in verses 2 and 3. To treat a rich person entering our meetings better than a poor person reveals what is in us.

a. *Favoritism reveals our inner values.*

When we favor the rich over the poor, we act as if wealth makes a person better for whatever reason. Such thoughts are evil.

b. *Favoritism reveals a lack of understanding concerning God's values.*

Our thoughts are evil because we are not truly valuing what God values. God has chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith. When the poor love God, they are spiritually rich and have a high standing before God. But if we favor the rich over the poor, we reveal that we do not value what God has valued.

Poverty does not make a person better. But God has chosen the poor, "foolish" and weak, so that no one should boast (1 Corinthians 1:26-29; cf. Jeremiah 9:23-24). The noble and the intellectual also will tend to boast and might be those whom we tend to favor. But God does not value worldly wisdom or the supposed intellectual achievements of men or the strength of man.

c. *Favoritism may reveal a lack of fully grasping reality.*

It was strange that those early believers favored the rich, because they were those who exploited the Christians, taking them to court and slandering the name of Jesus.

Favoritism may hinder us seeing fully the truth. Those who are wise according to the world, i.e., intellectuals, are often those who make fun of Biblical beliefs. Yet we sometimes favor them over "common" workers who may be more spiritually mature.

James is not saying that we should treat the rich badly. He is correcting our evaluation of the rich. They are not better because they are rich and should not be treated better, just because they are rich.

3. ***The broader argument (2:8-11): Favoritism goes against God's law.***

a. *Favoritism is contrary to God's law to love our neighbor as ourselves.*

The commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves summarizes the law in our relation to other people. James says, if we are fulfilling this law, we are doing well. We do not treat ourselves more poorly when we are less smart or less rich. So if we show partiality, we fail to keep this law.

b. *Failing to keep the law in just one point makes us lawbreakers.*

If we do not love others as we love ourselves, then we have broken the law. That makes us lawbreakers. Prisoners all wore the same prison clothes. It does not matter what law they broke. Their clothes mark them as lawbreakers. Any sin makes us guilty before God. Any sin requires the death of Jesus for forgiveness.

4. ***Concluding exhortation (2:12-13)***

James summarizes and concludes this section with the command, "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged according to the law of liberty". This "law of liberty" does not give freedom. We are freed from the bondage of sin and the Mosaic law in order to be able to love our neighbors (cf. Galatians 5:1; 6:2). The Spirit of God bears the fruit of love in our lives. We are to keep in step with the Spirit. We have been freed in order to love.

Even as believers there is a future judgment, the judgment seat of Christ, which concerns our works, not our salvation (2 Corinthians 5:10). If the quality our deeds is wrong, they will be burned and we will gain no reward. God will measure the quality at least in part by whether it is done according to the law of liberty, have we acted in love toward our neighbor.

James concludes with a warning in verse 13. "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy" (NASB). Jesus also said this in the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

God will show mercy to those who have shown mercy (v 13; cf. Matthew 5:7). We don't "earn" mercy but show that we have understood and received God's mercy in our lives (cf. Matthew 18:23-35). Those who have shown mercy, need not fear or be ashamed at the time of judgment.

Showing favoritism to the rich over the poor fails to show mercy to the poor mercy. Favoring the strong over the weak fails to show mercy to the weak. We need to show mercy by forgiving as we have been forgiven and by treating people impartially. We need most of all to understand and to thank God for the mercy He has shown us.