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James 2:1-13
The Sins of Partiality

Close your eyes for a moment and picture somebody that looks trustworthy, credible, and respectable. What kind of person did you think of? What did they look like, what do they sound like, how do they dress, how do they smell? Do they look neat and presentable, with clean and nice smelling clothes? Or disheveled and dirty, wearing ratty clothes that smell? If there are two people standing in front of you, one rich and one poor, what do they look like in your mind? How do they dress? If there's two people in front of you, one educated and one uneducated, what do you think they look like? How do they sound when they talk, how do they carry themselves? Whether you're conscious of it or not, we all have different biases, assumptions, and expectations about how different kinds of people should or should not appear. We're constantly making evaluations and value judgments about the people we see and meet based on what they look like, what they wear, how they sound, and so on and so forth. And so it begs the question: when we meet people for the first time, do we judge and treat them in a way that's based on how they outwardly appear? If two people walked through those doors right now - one dressed in a three-piece suit and the other dressed in rags - how would you respond to each of them?

We might be tempted to show *partiality* towards different kinds of people - to prefer one to the other, to show favoritism, to favor one and disfavor the other. We're tempted to make judgments and evaluations of people based on outward, even superficial factors, and we're tempted to treat people differently because of it, for a wide variety of different reasons. But the real question is: what does God think of this? What's the *Christian* way for us to view and treat different kinds of people? How would Jesus view and treat people? Our passage this morning, James 2:1-13, addresses this issue for us. Here, James makes it clear what Christ demands of us, as His people, when it comes to the issue of showing partiality or favoritism: he tells us, first, that it is just plain *un-Christian* for us to show partiality - especially within the church. James makes this clear, illustrates the point, and gives us several reasons why this is wrong, in vv.1-9. But then James goes on to show why this particular command matters: and it's because it's a command of God, and *all the commands of God, the entire law of Christ* is of the utmost importance to us; we cannot show *partiality* between the different commands of God, but must

rightly receive the entirety of God's Word of Truth. In other words: this passage teaches us to show no partiality between different kinds of people *or* between the different commands of God.

So let's begin with the first part:

I. Don't Show Partiality (Favoritism) Between Different Kinds of People (2:1-9)

Our passage begins with a pretty straightforward command in v.1: "My brothers," that is, my brothers and sisters, fellow Christians, "show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." So first we have to ask, what does it mean to show "partiality"? To be partial to something is to be biased toward it, to favor and prefer it. To be *impartial* means to be indifferent and neutral. Another way to translate "partiality" is "favoritism."

But I think it will help us to first understand what this verse *doesn't mean*. This does *not* mean that there are no legitimate distinctions between different people in our lives and the way we're meant to interact with them, as if we must treat all people in the exact same way with absolutely no distinctions whatsoever - that would be absurd! For example, if you're married, you can't treat every man the exact same way you treat your husband, or every woman the same way you treat your wife; that would get you in trouble very quickly! If you don't love your wife more than other women, something is seriously wrong! Likewise, you can't treat your neighbor's kids or a stranger's kids in the same way you treat your own kids; if you leave your kids at the grocery store and don't bring them home, then you're guilty of abandonment and neglect; but if you take a stranger's kids home from the store with you then you're guilty of kidnapping! Clearly, we have to make distinctions; we have different kinds of relationships with different people, and the Bible tells us we are to have distinct, special relationships and interactions with each other based on our different relationships. So this verse doesn't remove all distinctions.

So what *does* this verse mean? The original word that James uses here for "partiality" or "favoritism" literally means "to receive the face" - that is, "to make judgments about people based on their external appearance."¹ In fact, the word for "partiality" or "favoritism" he uses here is plural - meaning he prohibits "*acts* of partiality" or "favoritism." One commentator explained it this way: "this makes clear that the prohibition has wide-ranging application. We are not to make decisions about people based on any external factor, whether it be dress, color of skin, or general physical appearance. The OT repeatedly stresses that God himself is impartial, looking at the heart rather than at the outside of a person, and God's people are to imitate him in

¹ Moo, *The Letter of James*, p.

this respect.”² In other words, we’re commanded to not show partiality or favoritism between people based on these external, superficial factors or make value judgments about people because of them. To do so would be un-Christian - it would be incompatible with our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we should have a neighborly, Christ-like love for all people, seeing all people with the inherent dignity and value of being made in the image of God. If we really believe this, then there is absolutely no room in the Christian faith for us to show partiality between different kinds of people and treat them like they have more or less value because of their social class, how much money they make, whether they are male or female, their ethnicity, their cultural background, their skin color, their accent, what they look like, sound like, smell like, dress, like, and so on and so forth. Things like racism, classism, and sexism are thoroughly un-Christian - they have nothing to do with Christ, and therefore, if we are Christians, we should have nothing to do with them either. We should not show any partiality because of such distinctions. So that means that if someone is different from you, in any apparent outward way, you can’t make value judgments about them because of that; nor can you treat them any *better* or *any worse* because of it. For example, it would be thoroughly wrong to treat someone as inferior or to treat them poorly because of the color of their skin. But it would also be thoroughly wrong and un-Christian to treat someone as *superior*, or to give them preferential treatment, because of their skin color. Both are examples of partiality. It is wrong and sinful to treat the ethnic majority, rich people, or men as if they are morally superior or more valuable. We see examples of this kind of partiality all throughout history. And it is also just as wrong and sinful to treat ethnic minorities, poor people, or women as if they are morally superior or more valuable. We see examples of this kind of partiality a lot today, don’t we? We may think, “Ok, well if I’m tempted to show favoritism to one (the rich guy, for example), well, then I’ll just show favoritism to the other guy instead!” But reverse partiality is still partiality - it’s still wrong. As Christians, we are to repent from and be free from the partiality and favoritism that arises from worldly values and judgments. This is true for us at all times, in all of our relationships.

But it must *especially be true* for the way we act in the context of the local church. The church, of all places, is to be the place where we live as a counter-cultural community, displaying to the world around us what it looks like to live out the values of the kingdom of heaven, to be a

² Moo, *The Letter of James*, p.130.

people shaped by the gospel of Christ Jesus, not shaped by the world. So James now concretely applies this principle to the local church context in vv.2-4: “For a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ while you say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there,’ or ‘Sit down at my feet,’ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” The point James is making is pretty clear, and so is the scene he’s painting for us. When James says “your assembly” he means your church gathering - our weekly worship service, what we’re assembling to do right now. Now imagine that two guys walk in: one is wearing a three-piece business suit, he’s wearing the latest smart watch, he rolls up in a lamborghini. But the other guy walks in wearing dirty, messy, mismatched, torn clothes that are little better than rags, smelling like he hasn’t showered in days. We immediately start making assumptions, don’t we: one’s rich, the other poor. How do we respond? How do we greet these two different visitors? Here’s what happens in the scene James paints here: church members go up to the rich-looking man and say, “Oh, we’re so glad you’re here, it’s so great to meet you! Come, sit in the best seat of the house! Here, would you like a drink? Is there anyway we can make you feel more welcome?” But the church doesn’t make the poor guy feel welcome; they treat him with disdain, like they’re embarrassed by him. Someone does speak to him, only to say, “No, don’t sit there! You go stand over in the corner, or go sit on the floor.” Clearly that would be to treat the rich guy better than the poor, to show partiality and favoritism, and mistreating the poor guy, treating him like he’s less valuable and not wanted! And James’s point is: this would *clearly be wrong*, showing the church members to have sinful motivations, making evil, sinful value judgments in their hearts.

So one clear application for us this morning is making sure that all feel welcome here, at Bread of Life - regardless of your social class, regardless of how much money you make, what you look like, or where you’re from. And one example of how we can do this is by not judging or treating people differently based on what they wear to church. We should not treat or judge anyone in the church any differently, regardless of whether they’re wearing shorts and a T-shirt, ripped jeans, or a coat and tie. We must show no partiality nor make evil judgments in our hearts.

But let’s ask: why would we ever be tempted to act this way? One reason is self-interest. We might be tempted to show partiality to the rich, for example, because we think that we can benefit from them. It’s not hard to imagine why a church might want to show special attention to

the rich, hoping they'll stay and give more money, than to the poor who doesn't have much to offer in the realm of worldly wealth. But this kind of thinking is incredibly worldly, sinful, and un-Christian! It shows that we're viewing things through the eyes of the world, not the eyes of God! So James addresses this with his first reason why we shouldn't show partiality, in vv.5-6a: "Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man." In other words, he's saying, "Don't view these two men through the eyes of the world, but through the eyes of God; don't look at worldly wealth, look at spiritual wealth." If they both have faith in Christ alone for salvation, then they are both equally *rich* in Christ through faith, heirs of the Kingdom of God, eternal life, and all the blessings of salvation! Or to put it even more starkly: if the poor guy is a Christian, and the rich guy isn't, then even though the poor guy is homeless and the rich guy lives in a mansion, the poor guy *is far better off, far richer, with a far greater inheritance and future security* because God has forgiven him his sins, declared him righteous, adopted him as a child of God, and declared him a co-heir with Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory! So how dare we dishonor them when God grants them infinite, eternal honor, glory, riches, and value in Christ through faith?

James then gives a second reason not to show partiality to the rich over the poor in vv.6b-7: "Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?" The early church was enduring persecution, and those who persecuted them weren't the poor - it was the rich and powerful social elites! So another reason they might be tempted to show partiality to the rich is out of fear of persecution, or out of the self-interest to try and gain favor with the rich, to flatter and cater to them so that they won't get further oppressed or persecuted. But that's not acting in faith and trust - it's acting in fear.

The third reason he gives is in vv.8-9: "If you really fulfill the royal law according to Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." In other words, to show partiality is to *sin* against God by breaking His commands and to *sin* against other people. Now, we're going to come back to what he means by "royal law" in our next point, but for now, let's just recognize that to show partiality - to show some favor and others disfavor - is not loving our neighbor as ourself. We would all feel unloved in such a situation, wouldn't we?

Therefore, we should love one another and love others by not showing partiality or favoritism, but instead by treating everyone with the equal dignity and value of being made in the image of God, and with the right perspective that what is *most valuable* is having our identity and worth being found in Christ.

But maybe you're thinking, "Ok, but why is this such a big deal that we don't show partiality? Does it really matter if I care about this command or not?" And the answer is: yes, because we don't get to pick and choose which commands of Christ we want to obey. Which leads us to our second and final point...

II. Don't Show Partiality Between the Different Commands of God (2:10-13)

As Christians, we must be fully committed to following Christ through faith - and that means, being committed to all of God's Word, to being like Christ in all things, and obeying the entire Law of Christ. We saw this last week, in chapter 1:19-27, where we saw that *true Christians* are not just hearers of the Word of God, but *doers* of the Word. It doesn't mean we perfectly obey God in everything - no one does - but it *does mean* that if we're truly Christians, then we have new hearts, and that God writes His Law, the Law of Christ, on our hearts, gradually changing and transforming us so that we turn from sin and increasingly grow in rightly desiring and obeying GOD's Word. Chapter 1, v.18, speaks of God bringing about our salvation through the "Word of Truth" - that is, the gospel of Christ. Then, 1:21 spoke of it as the "implanted word" that changes our hearts so that we don't just hear God's Word, but believe and obey it. 1:25 said that we do the word by doing GOD's "perfect law, the law of liberty." As I explained last week, this isn't talking about the law of Moses in the Old Testament, but rather, God's Law as fulfilled and revealed in Jesus Christ - in both His life and His teachings, then further explained in the rest of the New Testament. So when James talks about the "royal law" here in chapter 2, verse 8. I think he's still talking about the "perfect law, the law of liberty" - that is, the law of Christ. "Royal law" refers to the law of the Kingdom of Christ; as Christians, we are citizens of the Kingdom Heaven, and Jesus is our King - we are under His Law. Yet this loyal law is a law of *liberty*, because He writes it on our hearts! It's not a Law that we obey in order to be saved - no, Christ perfectly fulfilled the Law on our behalf, so that we are righteous and saved purely by grace through faith in His death and resurrection in our place! But if we genuinely have faith, then we *will produce good works* - that is, we will grow in obeying the law

of Christ, because if we're really Christians, then the Law of Christ, His Royal Law of Liberty, is written on our hearts, gradually changing us from the inside out.

So what exactly *is* the Law of Christ, then? What does it say? In one sense, we learn what it says by rightly understanding the whole Bible - the Old Testament points forward to the Law of Christ and is fulfilled by it, and the New Testament shows us how Christ fulfills and reveals it; the letters of the Apostles, like Paul and James, unpack it for us and show us how to live in light of it. But there's also a short answer: Jesus said you can sum up the whole law in 2 commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. So if we want to know what God wants us to do, we ask, "How do I rightly love God and love others in this situation?" And we learn the answers by studying God's Word through the lens of faith in Christ and applying it to our lives. And that's exactly what we've done today with the issue of showing partiality. If we show partiality, we're sinning because we aren't loving our neighbor as ourselves and we're breaking the law of Christ (v.9).

But now James presses deeper and underscores the importance of obedience to the *entire* law of Christ in vv.10-11: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law." In other words, he's saying, if you break one law of God, you break them all. If you murder someone and you're put on trial, you can't say to the judge, "Hey, listen, I know I murdered that guy, but at least I didn't commit adultery! I'm a maybe a murderer, but I'm a very faithful, loving husband! So I can't be that bad, right?" But we all know that would be ridiculous; it just doesn't work that way. He's still a murderer; he's guilty; he broke the law. And if that's true for human courts, how much more so is it true before the throne of God, He who judges the living and the dead? After all, God sees all, He's the perfect, holy judge, and His standard is *Himself*, the perfect righteousness of God!

In other words, James is saying, we can't pick and choose which commands of God we want to obey and which ones we don't; we can't act like some commands God gives are more important than others, like some are optional. It just doesn't work that way. To break one law is to break them all. Therefore, to follow Christ means we are to pursue the *entire* law of Christ. We can't say, "Well, I really like these Bible verses - but I don't like those, so I'm just not going

to obey them.” We can’t say, “Well, I know the Bible says that I should stop doing sinning in this area, and that I should start obeying in this way - but that’s just too difficult for me, and I don’t really think it’s all that important; and after all, I obey in all these other areas of my life! So what’s the big deal?” But we can’t do that - we can’t show partiality to some of the commands of God while ignoring or rejecting or willfully disobeying others. So, for example, we can’t say, “I know God says I shouldn’t show partiality between the rich and poor, but I just really don’t like those guys; and it’s not like I’m *completely* disobeying God’s Word, because I’m doing a great job at loving the people that I do like, so I’m fine, right?” No, that’s showing partiality to the commands of God - and *partial obedience is full disobedience*.

So as I studied this passage this week and thought about how to apply it to our contemporary context, I thought, “What commands of God are we modern Christians in America most tempted to treat as optional and give less priority than others?” And I think one of the most obvious answers is that many of us today are tempted to treat biblical commands from God regarding the local church as if they are optional and not really important. But we don’t get to show partiality between the commands of God. The vast majority of the commands we’re given in the New Testament are “one another” commands - and they’re given within the context of the local church. In fact, many are explicitly *about* the church, and we can’t obey them without belonging to a specific church family. For example, Christ tells us how to love one another when a fellow Christian in the church sins in Matthew 18, and it includes telling it to the church and dealing with it together; we see the same thing in 1 Cor. 5. These passages are impossible to obey if you don’t belong to a local church community. Same for all the passages dealing with elders and deacons, or Heb. 13:17, where we’re told to submit to our pastors leaders - that is, the elders of the church. If you’re not part of a local church family, you can’t obey those commands. Or the command in Heb. 10:25 to “not neglect to meet together,” in order that we can “stir up on another to love and good works” as a church. God has made it clear that being a Christian is not an individualist hobby, but also means we’re part of a family - and we’re commanded to live that out with a specific local church family; meaning we’re commanded to make it a priority to meet together, to love one another, to pour into each other’s lives. AND that’s even implied by our passage this morning, in vv.1-9, isn’t it? THE command is that we don’t show partiality between rich and poor *when they come into our assembly*, into our weekly worship service when we gather as a local church! Obviously, we can’t say, “Oh yeah, I’m obeying that because I don’t

even show up to the assembly in the first place!” No, it implies that obeying GOD’s Law includes making it a priority to gather together as a church family in order to love one another as yourself.

And just in case we’re tempted to buck and say, “What’s the big deal? If I’m saved through faith then why are you treating these good works like they’re so important?” James concludes by warning us just how important they are in vv.12-13: “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” On the final day, we are all going to stand before God the Judge, and give an account for our lives. Now, we are all sinners - we are all guilty of breaking God’s Law in so many ways, and we all deserve God’s eternal wrath against our sins in Hell! We can’t hope to stand on the basis of our own works, since we’re all transgressors and lawbreakers; we are guilty sinners. Our only hope is the gospel of Christ! That Jesus Christ, the God-Man, took on flesh, perfectly obeyed God’s Law and fulfilled it on our behalf, died on the cross for our sins, bearing God’s wrath in our place, and rose on the third day, defeating our sin and the death we deserve! And the glorious good news is that if you believe this, if you put your trust in Christ as the Lord of glory, as the true God and your only hope and savior, then you will be saved! On that day, when we stand before God the Judge, even though we deserve to be declared guilty, if we’re covered by the blood of Christ, then He will declare us, “Perfectly Righteous!” because He will accept Christ’s sacrifice in our place! We will be saved not by works, but by God’s grace through faith in Christ!

But what, then, does James mean when he says we will be “judges under the law of liberty”? He means that on that day, as we are declared righteous because of what Christ has done for us, we will also give an account for how we have lived *under the law of Christ*, the law of liberty, as Christians. It doesn’t mean that He’s going to see whether or not we’ve done enough to be saved - no, we’re saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! BUt saving faith *never is alone*. As we give an account for our lives, all of these good works will be *vindicating evidence* that we really are in Christ, vindicating evidence that we really are Christians and have been given new hearts and filled with the Spirit of God - evidenced by the good works the Holy Spirit produces in our lives - namely, the good works of the law of CHrist, the law of love and liberty. This is why James says, “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” I think he’s saying the same thing that Jesus said in Matt. 6:14-15, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive

you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” If we have truly experienced forgiveness from God in the gospel of Christ, then we will forgive and show mercy to others; but if we do not show mercy and forgiveness, then it shows that our hearts haven’t been changed by the gospel, like the parable in Matt. 18 of the servant who’s forgiven his debts, but then turns around and chokes out someone who owes him a lesser debt, and doesn’t forgive him. If we truly believe the gospel, there will be evidence of our faith in the way it changes our hearts and lives - if we receive mercy in the Christ and our hearts are changed by His law of liberty, then we must show not partiality, but mercy and grace to all.

Therefore, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, let us live out our faith in the gospel by living under the law of liberty. Let us not show partiality to one another or other people, but love others like Christ loves us. Let us not show partiality to different commands of God, but let us repent of our disobedience and ask Him for the grace to obey *all* of His command, the whole law of Christ. Let us speak and act and do everything we do as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty - as those whose hearts have been changed by the gospel of Christ!

And if you’re not a Christian, then this passage today warns you to live in light of the coming judgment as well - it is a warning that you will be judged before the living God, who sees and knows all, and that you will be held up at the standard of *perfect righteousness* - and that means you’re a sinner, like all of us, and that you will be declared guilty and sentenced to the penalty of eternal death in Hell, like we all deserve. But there is hope! Turn to Christ, the Lord of glory, and put your faith in Him alone, believe He paid the penalty for your sins, ask Him to show you mercy, and He will! Then you can make your faith public through baptism as evidence that you’re responding to Christ through faith. If this is you this morning, or you have any questions, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.