

## The Rich and the Poor

Lesson for February 19, 2023

**Unit III:** God's Call and Its Responsibilities

**Scriptural Background:** James 2:1-12

**Printed Text:** James 2:1-12

**Key verse:** *“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)

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. So, one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned, “If Christians have caste differences also” he said, “I might as well remain a Hindu.” That usher’s prejudice not only betrayed Jesus but also turned a person away from trusting Him as Savior.

Everyone has celebrity status with God. Everyone should be welcomed equally. This week’s lesson calls for respect of all people equally.

### Key Terms

1. **Favoritism** (verse 1) – Partiality; the practice of giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group at the expense of another.
2. **Judges** (verse 4) – Magistrates; rulers; one who makes judgments: such as a public official authorized to decide questions brought before a court.
3. **Poor** (verse 2) – Destitute; a state or condition in which a person is lacking sufficient money to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in a society.
4. **Royal law** (verse 8) – Law as connected with a king; divine law.

### Lesson Background

The Epistle of James was probably written by the half-brother of Jesus. James’ mother was Mary, and his father was Joseph. Paul called him the Lord’s brother in Galatians 1:19 “But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother.”

James was not known to Christianity, until after the resurrection of Jesus. He became the head of the church in Jerusalem, possibly because he was the brother of Jesus. Paul and James had a different view of Christianity. Paul looked at it from the mystical view, and James looked at it from the standpoint of the law. The primary difference was Paul preached justification by faith in

Jesus Christ, and James taught that we will show good works in our daily walk, if we are saved. In truth, there was no difference at all. James was just ministering to Jewish Christians, and Paul was ministering to Gentiles.

James would have been trained in the Jewish religion because his parents were Hebrews. He would have been perfect to lead the Jews who had accepted Jesus as their Savior. The letter was actually written to Jewish Christians, which is still in character for this to be the half-brother of Jesus. The letter is even addressed to the twelve tribes of Israel. It is, however, useful to all Christians, as well as Jews.

It was written before 62 A.D. which is the year believed to be the year of death for James.

James is a book about the application of our faith and How important it is to learn and grow in Christ. That way, we can grow in faith and maturity so we can apply our Christian character and conduct in how we are to others! The primary theme running through James is the knowledge we are given by our Lord. The knowledge we gain from our experiences in life must be rooted in our hearts so it can bubble up into our daily life. That is, the knowledge that is in our heart must transition to how we live our life! At the time, the Jewish religious leaders and many Greek philosophers believed that we are called to gain knowledge for knowledge's sake. To them, its only purpose is that it improves who we are as a person. But there is no requirement to put any knowledge into practice, and some even taught only a low-lie person would practice faith. They sincerely believed knowledge alone was the way to spiritual enlightenment; they were sincerely wrong! James combats this terrible mindset that was starting to come about in his time and that has taken root in many churches today. Our knowledge must change over from our hearts to our hands and feet, so it is integrated into our life and church!

The Epistle of James is about how "to be" a Christian of faith so we will be able to handle problems and life while being "doers" of our faith. When we are being real with our faith, we will be growing, learning, maturing, and we will be leading a life of excellence to our Lord's glory!

During the time of James, the church was at a crossroads of ending its "honeymoon" period of being ignored by the religious leaders, so they were growing and feeling comfortable and good. They were still a part of Judaism and had not split off from their roots. Now, they are being singled out and picked on. The persecutions were just starting; the two other Jameses in the New Testament had been martyred, Steven had been stoned to death, and many were leaving the faith because of fear. The Church was also starting to deal with the human, sinful nature of gossip, strife, carnality, slander, doctrinal arguments, and power plays, so their faith was becoming useless and unproductive - the themes we still have with us today. The self-filled life and the focus on the will of ourselves was overtaking fulfillment in Christ and seeking God's Will (John 1:16; 3:30; Ephesians 1:23; 3:19; 4:13; Colossians. 1:19; Colossians. 1:25). James seeks to write an enthusiastic praise of Christ and an encouragement to the saints to look to Christ in faith and not to their circumstances. Thus, we will then be able to live a righteous life and be a meaningful Christian.

James begins chapter 2 on partiality with an exhortation (verse 1), then a brief illustration (verses 2-4). Most of this discussion is an argument against partiality (verses 5-13). First, partiality

shows inconsistency in one's conduct: Those we spurn are the ones God has chosen (verse 5) and shows inconsistency in one's conduct: those we favor are the godless whom God rejects (verses 6-7).

Second, partiality is more than an error in judgment; it is an act of sin. The one who shows respect of persons is a transgressor of the law. The law is like a ring or hedge encircling those within. When one breaks this ring, he stands outside (verse 10), becoming a transgressor, whether he commits adultery, murder, or shows partiality. Third, James argues that partiality provokes God's judgment (verses 12-13).

## I. Be Careful (James 2:1-4)

**The faith:** This refers not to the act of believing, but to the entire Christian faith (Jude 3), which has as its central focus Jesus Christ.

**Do not hold the faith:** The glorious faith we have, the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, should never be associated with partiality (discrimination). The Lord of glory Himself shows no partiality (Deuteronomy 10:17 and Acts 10:34) so neither should those who put their trust in Him.

**Our Lord Jesus Christ:** Christ is the one who reveals the glory of God. In His incarnation, He showed only impartiality (Matthew 22:16). For example, consider the non-elite people included in His genealogy, His choice of the humble village of Nazareth as His residence for 30 years, and His willingness to minister in Galilee and Samaria, both regions held in contempt by Israel's leaders.

**With respect/partiality:** Originally, this word referred to raising someone's face or elevating the person, but it came to refer to exalting someone strictly on a superficial, external basis, such as appearance, race, wealth, rank or social status. We do well to remember that James wrote to a very partial age, filled with prejudice and hatred based on class, ethnicity, nationality, and religious background. In the ancient world people were routinely and permanently categorized because they were Jew or Gentile, slave or free, rich or poor, Greek or barbarian, or whatever.

A significant aspect of the work of Jesus was to break down these walls that divided humanity, and to bring forth one new race of mankind in Him (Ephesians 2:14-15).

**Assembly:** Literally "a gathering together" or "synagogue". In the ancient Greek, the word **assembly** is literally *synagogue*, the name of the meeting place for Jews. The fact that James calls a *Christian* meeting place a *synagogue* shows that he wrote before Gentiles were widely received into the church. At the time James wrote, most all Christians came from a Jewish heritage. This is the only place in the New Testament where an **assembly** of Christians is clearly called a *synagogue*. Since James was writing early in the church's history to Jewish believers (1:1), he used both this general word and the normal Greek work for "church" (5:14), to describe the church's corporate meetings during that period of transition.

“As Christians have no church-buildings at this period, their place of **meeting** was usually some large room in the house of a wealthy member or a hall hired for the purpose (Acts 19:9), where outsiders were free to attend the ordinary services... They were to be welcomed but welcomed without any servility or snobbery.” (Moffatt)

**Gold ring:** While Jews commonly wore rings (Luke 15:22), few could afford gold ones. However, there are some reports that in the ancient world the most ostentatious people wore rings on every finger but the middle one to show off their economic status (some ancient sources indicate that there were even ring rental businesses).

**Goodly apparel:** This word refers to bright shining garments and is used of the gorgeous garment Herod’s soldiers put on Jesus to mock Him (Luke 23:11), and of the apparel of an angel (Acts 10:30). It can also refer to bright, flashy color and to brilliant, glittering, sparkling ornamentation. James is not condemning this unbeliever for his distracting dress, but the church’s flattering reaction to it.

**A poor man:** “The word signifies one very poor, even to beggarliness.” (Poole) Although there were people of means in the early church, the church consisted mostly of common, poor people. Throughout Scripture the poor are objects of God’s special concern.

**Sit thou here in a good place:** A more comfortable, prominent place of honor. The synagogues and assembly halls of the first century sometimes had benches around the outside wall and a couple of benches in front. Most of the congregation either sat cross-legged on the floor or stood. There were a limited number of good seats; they were the ones the Pharisees always wanted (Mark 12:38-39).

James is showing them in this, that they had been showing preference to the rich. In God’s sight, the rich should be given no more privileges than the poor. There are many churches today that would turn away the poor man in this instance.

**Vile raiment** might be just enough to keep them not only at the back, but completely out of the church. The outward appearance of a man does not reveal what is in his heart. The heart determines whether you are a Christian, or not.

**Not then partial:** or “made distinction”. The true nature of the sin in this passage, not the lavish apparel or rings of the rich man or that he was given a good seat.

**Judges of evil thoughts:** This is better translated “judges with vicious intentions”. James feared that his readers would behave just like the sinful world by catering to the rich and prominent while shunning the poor and common.

Church is not for the privileged few, but for all who seek God. We are not to judge man at all, but if we did, we would not judge fairly. We would be thinking of the flesh of man, and God looks at the heart of man.

The unity and openness of the early church was shocking to the ancient world. But this unity didn't come automatically. As this command from James shows, the apostles had to teach the early church to never hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ... with partiality.

- To show **partiality** shows that we care more for the outward appearance than we do upon the heart. *For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart* (1 Samuel 16:7). God looks at the heart, and so should we.
- To show **partiality** shows that we misunderstand who is important and blessed in the sight of God. When we assume that the rich man is more important to God or more blessed by God, we put too much value in material riches.
- To show **partiality** shows a selfish streak in us. Usually, we favor the **rich man** over the **poor man** because we believe we can get more from the **rich man**. He can do favors for us that the **poor man** can't.

## II. Be Courteous (James 2:5-8)

**Hath not God chosen:** Though it is easy for man to be partial to the rich, God isn't partial to them. In fact, since riches are an obstacle to the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24), there is a sense in which God specially blesses the poor of this world.

They are **chosen... to be rich in faith** because the **poor of this world** simply have more opportunities to trust God. Therefore, they may be far more **rich in faith** than the rich man. "The rich man may trust Him; but the poor man must... the poor man has no fortress in which to hide, except the two strong arms of God." (Meyer)

"This seems to refer to Matthew 11:5: *And the poor have the Gospel preached to them*. These believed on the Lord Jesus, and found his salvation; while the *rich* despised, neglected, and persecuted him." (Clarke)

**Hath not God chosen:** The poor are **chosen** in the sense that the poor more readily respond to God in faith, having fewer obstacles to the kingdom. "Church history demonstrates that comparatively more poor people than rich have responded to the gospel." (Hiebert)

When we choose people by what we can see on the surface, we miss the mind of God. Remember that Judas *appeared* to be much better leadership material than Peter. What is more, we can say that God has **chosen the poor** in the sense that when He added humanity to His deity and came to earth, He came into poverty. "There is nothing that men dread more than poverty. They will break every commandment in the Decalogue rather than be poor. But it is God's chosen lot. He had one opportunity only of living our life, and He chose to be born of parents too poor to present more than two doves at his presentation in the temple." (Meyer)

God has not *only* **chosen the poor**. Yet we may say that He has **chosen the poor** first, in the sense Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 1:26: *For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called*. "Not that God hath chosen all the poor in the world, but his choice is chiefly of them." (Poole)

We should remind ourselves that God also never calls for partiality *against* the rich. If one must judge in a dispute between a rich man and a poor man, they should let the law and the facts of the case decide the judgment instead of the economic class of those in the dispute.

**Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts?** James reminded his readers that the rich often sin against them (**oppress you... drag you**). This is often because the love of money is the root of every kind of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). For this reason alone, the rich are not worthy of the partiality often shown to them. History shows that the rich can indeed oppress the poor. “Trample upon you with the feet of pride and cruelty; yea, devour you, as the greater fish do the lesser... This is a sin against race, grace, and place.” (Trapp)

**Do they not blaspheme:** “If the rich here spoken of were Christians, then they may be said to blaspheme Christ’s name, when by their wicked carriage they caused it to be blasphemed by others... but if rich unbelievers be here meant, the rich men of those times being generally great enemies to Christianity.” (Poole)

**If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture:** James anticipated that some of his readers might defend their partiality to the rich as simply loving the rich man as their neighbor in obedience to the law.

**If you show partiality, you commit sin:** The problem isn’t that one is nice to the rich. The problem is that one does **show partiality** to the rich and is not nice to the poor man! So, you can’t excuse your **partiality** by saying, “I’m just fulfilling the command to love my neighbor as myself.”

**The royal law:** Our God is a great King, and His law is a **royal law**. Our King Jesus put special emphasis on this command (Matthew 22:36-40) from the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:18). James is reminding us that the poor man is just as much our **neighbor** as the rich man is.

**Love they neighbor as thyself:** This commandment, *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*, is a *royal law*, not only because it is ordained of God, and proceeds from his *kingly* authority over men, but because it is so *useful, suitable, and necessary* to the present state of man... we give the description *royal* to whatever is excellent, noble, grand, or useful.” (Clarke)

### III. Be Cautious (James 2:9-12)

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

**If:** Better translated as “since,” the Greek construction of this conditional statement indicates that this practice was in fact happening among James’ readers.

**Have respect:** The form of the Greek verb indicates that their behavior was not an occasional slip but a continual practice.

**Convinced of the law:** Specifically, by the commands (in Deuteronomy 1:17 and 16:19).

**Transgressors:** This refers to one who goes beyond the law of God. Respect of persons makes one a violator of God's law.

If you respect someone because of their wealth or position in society, you have not kept the two laws Jesus said covered all the laws.

**Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all:** James here guards us against a selective obedience, the sort that will pick and choose which commands of God should be obeyed and which can be safely disregarded.

We can't say, "I like God's command against murder, so I'll keep that one. But I don't like His command against adultery, so I will disregard it." God cares about the **whole law**.

The **whole law** must be kept if one will be justified by the law. Adamson quotes one ancient Rabbi who taught: "If a man performs all the commandments, save one, he is guilty of all and each; to break one precept is to defy God who commanded the whole."

James is trying to show, in this, that by the keeping of the law, no man is saved. The penalty for sin is death. Jesus took our sin upon His body on the cross, if we are believers; we are not guilty of sin. We have been pardoned by His great act of mercy.

The keepers of the law are not Christians, because they have not accepted the full pardon through the shed blood of Jesus for their sins.

These quotations are taken from (Exodus 20:13-14 and Deuteronomy. 5:17-18).

**So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty:** We are under the **law of liberty**. It has **liberty**, yet it is still a **law** that must be obeyed and that we will be judged by at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10).

"It is also called a law of liberty, because it is freely and willingly kept of the regenerate, to whom it is no burden or bondage." (Trapp)

In both the Old Testament and New Testament, God's revealed, inerrant, sufficient, and comprehensive Word is called "law" (Psalm 19:7). The presence of His grace does not mean there is no moral law or code of conduct for believers to obey. Believers are enabled by the Spirit to keep it.

The law of liberty in Jesus Christ is what Christians are under. We are not perfect, just forgiven. We are righteous in the sight of the Father, because we have been washed in the precious blood of Jesus Christ and made righteous. We have taken on His righteousness in exchange for our sin.

### **Lesson Summary**

One issue that plagues Christians is passing judgments based upon physical appearances. The problem of favoritism and discrimination has been issue even back in the days of Jacob and Esau. The Greek word that our translations render, "partiality" or "favoritism" was used by the

Greeks in the consistently negative connotation of making judgments on the basis of a person's status, appearance, or other external matters unrelated to the merits of a case — in other words, being prejudiced. This is the issue that James is dealing with in this section of his letter.

James begins with a very simple, yet powerful point. Having faith in Jesus and showing favoritism are not compatible. A person cannot have prejudice or discriminate on the basis of a person's status, appearance, or other external matters that are not relevant to our relationship with God. We live in a world that is full of favoritism and discrimination. People are discriminated on the basis of how they look. People are discriminated on the basis of race. People are discriminated on the basis of status and success. People are discriminated on the basis of wealth. People are discriminated against because they are single, they are teens, or they are elderly. We can be discriminated by our address or zip code. I am quite convinced that we have been discriminated against by the state of Florida in our effort to get disability services to her because of where we live. The world is full of these unfair judgments. **If there is at least one community of people in this world where all receive equal treatment, it must be in the church!** Who we are according to the world's standards has no relevance at the foot of the cross.

We are equal sinners before the Almighty God. Jesus exemplified this truth while he lived on the earth. Who did Jesus spend the majority of his time with? When we think about the apostles we recall that these were ordinary men. They were not men held of high esteem or status. When we think of the multitudes Jesus spent so much time with tax collectors and sinners that the religious elite condemned him. Jesus did not treat people differently based on their education level, wealth, reputation, or status. Jesus dealt with people for who they were as a person. The scriptures repeatedly tell us that God looks at the heart and does not show partiality .

James takes a moment to explain a present problem or a hypothetical problem that is likely to occur. One can imagine the Christian audience who is hearing the words of this letter responding, "We do not show favoritism! There is no discrimination here!" Before we think this to be the case, James wants us to consider a situation that all Christians deal with.

James pictures two people who come into their assembly. One person is dressed very nicely, with a gold ring and fine clothing. To update the image to our present time, the person comes into our assembly in dress pants, a button down shirt and a tie. He is dressed nicely. To put the point that I think James is trying to put on it, the man is dressed the way we think he ought to be dressed when coming to the assembly for worship. What do we do with a person who comes in dressed this way? James says that we pay attention to him and give him a good place to sit. We greet the person and we welcome him here. We shake his hand and strike up a conversation with him. We usher him to his seat. The second person, however, is not dressed like him. He is poor and he is dressed in shabby, filthy clothing. Again, to update the imagery to today, the man has scraggly hair, bushy beard, and does not look like he has taken a bath in more than a week. His clothes are dirty and torn. He has tattoos running down his arms. The point that James is putting on this is that the man is dressed the way in which we ask in our minds, "What is he doing here?" "The liquor store is down the street. What is he doing here? He is at the wrong place." With the first man James says that we pay attention to him. But with this shabbily dressed man, we do not pay attention to him. We let him walk in and sit down. We do not greet him at the door. We do not welcome him. When he walks by, we act like we are busy doing something else. We pretend



we are talking to someone. Or we stare at the wall as if there is something important on it. We walk around the building to make sure that we do not have to make eye contact with him or speak with him.

James now issues the condemnation of our hearts in verse 4. We have discriminated (HCSB) in our hearts between these two people, as if one has a rightful place to be here and another does not. We have passed a judgment, not based upon the person, but based upon a person's looks. James offers a double condemnation upon us. He says that we have become "judges with evil thoughts." For James to call us judges is quite a condemnation in itself because it is this kind of judgment that Jesus strictly condemned when he taught, "Do not judge, so that you will not be judged" in Matthew 7:1. But not only are we condemned for being judges, but we are judges with evil thoughts. We are far from what God wants our hearts to be. We have passed judgments unrighteously with our evil thoughts. We have committed sin.

#### Why Favoritism Is Foolish (2:5-13)

James spends the rest of the time explaining why favoritism is foolish and sinful. James gives us a number of points why favoritism must stop.

God chose the poor to be rich in faith. How can we possibly discriminate against the poor? Why would we judge with evil thoughts those who come into our assembly who do not appear to be financially well off? Part of the good news of Jesus is that it is available to all people regardless of wealth or status. Remember in Jesus' sermon on the level plain that Jesus taught, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20 ESV). Favoritism is wrong because it contradicts God's own attitude. God's attitude is that the poor are the ones who are more receptive to the gospel call. They are the ones who are more likely to see their need for a Savior than those who are wealthy and are enjoying the pleasures this world has to offer. The poor have been given the offer to be rich in faith and to be heirs of God's kingdom. How then can we possibly treat the poor differently? The application of this can be extended to all of our differences. God has called all people to Christ, regardless of race, background, culture, age, weight, or anything else. Every person has the opportunity to the good news.

The rich oppress you. Why would we show favoritism toward the rich? The rich are the ones who oppress you. Essentially, why be partial toward the worldly rich when the worldly rich are certainly not partial to Christians?

Favoritism violates the royal law. When we have prejudice and show favoritism based on simply external things, then we are not living up to God's royal command. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. We do not want a person to pass judgment on us strictly by our age, color, status, or wealth. So why do we do this to others? We must really fulfill the law of God to love others as ourselves. Treat people the way you want people to treat you.

Favoritism is sinning. James is very clear in verse 9 that showing partiality is a sin. We are transgressors of the law.

Favoritism is not a "small" or "minor" sin. It is easy to think of prejudice as being a harmless act. We would probably think of it as an insignificant sin. But James tells us that if we break any part

of God's law, we are violators of the whole law. We have such a strange concept about God's law. We think there are sins that are not a big deal. We think there are some commands that can be broken and it will be okay. God says that if you break any of God's law that you have broken all of his laws. We do not get to pick and choose which laws we are going to keep. This command against partiality is just as important as all the other commands. God parallels this to the commands of adultery and murder. Every law of God matters and every law must be obeyed.

Therefore, we need to speak and act as those who are judged under the law of liberty (2:12). James told us in 1:25 that we are to look into the perfect law of liberty, see our flaws, and make corrections. Understand that we are going to be judged by the law. Therefore, we need to look at the law carefully and intently. The law demands that we speak and act without partiality.