

Wisdom in Showing Impartiality - James 2:1–13



What is God like? When answering this question, most of us think in terms of his justice, power, mercy, wisdom, immutability, eternality, and sovereignty. But we rarely (if ever) think of his impartiality. Yet the Bible makes it clear that “*God shows no partiality*” (Rom 2:11). We see this truth wonderfully displayed in Jesus. He was the same with poor Bartimaeus as he was with rich Zacchaeus. He was the same with the prostitute as he was with the Pharisee; the Samaritan as the Jew; the social elite as the social outcast; the lawyer as the leper; the politician as the publican; the wealthy as the poor; the strong as the weak. He was impartial.

One of the reasons God saves us is so that we might be like him. This means that like God we should show no partiality. James declares “*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory*” (v. 1). What does he mean? He tells us by way of an example:

“For if 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?” (vv. 2–4).

Here, James isn’t denouncing all rich people, nor is he praising all poor people. He isn’t saying there’s inherent vice in wealth, nor is he saying there’s inherent virtue

in poverty. His point is this: We must not over-value the rich and under-value the poor. In other words, we must not show partiality.

James provides four motives for obeying this command.

God's Grace (v. 5)

First, James appeals to God's grace:

"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?" (v. 5).

According to this verse, God places a three-fold dignity upon his people: (1) he chose them; (2) he chose them to be rich in faith; and (3) he chose them to be heirs of the kingdom (v. 5). (For more on this, see 1 Cor. 1:27–29.) This means that God loves, accepts, cherishes, and welcomes his people. He's going to put them on display for all eternity as a testimony to his glorious grace.

When we fail to treat his people accordingly, we dishonor those whom God honors. When we show favoritism on the basis of wealth, success, appearance, or popularity, we dishonor those whom God honors.

God's Name (vv. 6–7)

Second, James appeals to God's name:

"But you have dishonored the poor man. 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?" (vv. 6–7).

The Bible often employs a literary device known as *hyperbole*, meaning it exaggerates a truth for the sake of emphasis. This is what James does here. (1) Has God only chosen to save the poor (v. 5)? No. He also calls the rich (e.g., Joseph, Lydia, Philemon). James's point is that, generally speaking, God calls the poor. (2) Do all the rich oppress the poor (v. 6)? No. The Bible speaks of those who gave of their wealth to minister to the poor and advance the cause of the gospel. James's point is that, generally speaking, the rich oppress the poor.

That being the case, why would we show favoritism toward those who are most responsible for oppressing our fellow believers? Moreover, why would we show favoritism to those who blaspheme God's name? It makes no sense.

God's Law (vv. 8–11)

Third, James appeals to God's law:

“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the 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” (vv. 8–9).

The “royal law” is found in Leviticus 19:18. It’s cited six times in the gospels, and twice in the epistles. Christ refers to it as the great command (Matt 22:37). Showing favoritism is a failure to obey the “royal law” because it’s a failure to love. James makes it clear that if we disobey this one command, we “become guilty” of the whole law (vv. 10–11). Why? Simply put, the law is a unit. When we disobey one command, we’ve broken all of it.

God’s Judgment (vv. 12–13)

Fourth, James appeals to God’s judgment:

“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” (vv. 12–13).

Here, James refers to the law as a “law of liberty” because, in Christ, we’re (1) free from the rigour of the law (Rom 7:6), (2) free from the curse of the law (Gal 4:6), and (3) free to obey the law out of love and gratitude (Rom 12:1). On the judgment day, our good deeds will confirm that we’re in Christ. There isn’t any merit in these deeds because they’re the fruit of the Holy Spirit. But, our realization of this ought to shape the way we “speak and act” (v. 12), specifically, we should be merciful in our dealings with others (v. 13). Showing mercy demonstrates that we’ve experienced God’s mercy. His “abundant mercy” blots out our multitude of “transgressions” (Ps 51:1).

Knowing this, we’ll be meek in our attitude toward others. When we’re meek, there will be no room for favoritism in our hearts.

Application

When it comes to cultivating this kind of wisdom, we need to fix our eyes on Jesus. He exchanged wealth for poverty, and majesty for humility. He exchanged a throne for a manger, and a crown of glory for a crown of thorns. He exchanged the admiration of angels for the rejection of humans. We’re one with him through faith. May we, therefore, become imitators of him (Phil 2:5). May we “*show no partiality as [we] hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*”