
James

Lesson 2

“James Chapter 2”

Objective: To provide an exegetical analysis for this section and provide some hermeneutical insights that will be helpful in the application of this text.

Materials:

- Commentaries
- Books
- Bible Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Journal Articles
- Greek Text

Procedures

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- 1.** To provide a fresh, literalistic translation of the text.
 - 2.** To examine the background and historical setting of the textual world and any imagery used in the text.
 - 3.** To unpack the meaning of the text to the original audience.
 - 4.** To provide life applications of the text for us today.

There have been times that I have been embarrassed at church and particularly by things that were said or happened at church. One of those embarrassing things relates to a practice that I have often seen in Europe. In touring churches you will sometimes find pews with doors on them and walls around the pews and name plates on the door. I have learned that such facilities represent the fact that families of means would buy pews for their family to sit in at church. I had always thought that this was an anachronistic practice that came from medieval times, sort of like stocks, iron maidens, and other torture devices, but I was very much mistaken. Recently I became aware that something very similar has happened and continues to happen at our own church and more horrifying to me still is that some people take pride in such a practice. I would have thought with even a basic modicum of cultural sensitivity such practices would be a thing of rarity or the past, but how naive I have been.

Recently I was made aware of a couple that visited our church and only a few minutes after the morning worship service began they were seen exiting the auditorium rather hurriedly and someone stopped them and asked them very politely why they

were leaving? They said they were leaving because they had been asked on two separate occasions, that morning, to move because they were sitting in someone's seats. In some ways this scenario seems more barbaric and uncaring even than the stalls in the ancient churches of Europe that have walls, gates, and nameplates, because, in our church, there is no way to know if you are sitting in someone's seat, there are no labels, walls, or nameplates present. All of this makes me wonder if people have ever read the Epistle of James, especially chapter 2. My heart is broken for this family that were visiting to see if this might be the place where they could come and worship God and find a family of believers that would encourage, empower, and enrich their relationship with God and his people. What must they think? What must God think?

^{2:1} My brothers, do not in partiality have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. ^{2:2}For if a man enters the synagogue with a gold ring on his finger wearing wearing glamorous clothing, and a poor man in filthy clothing enters, ^{2:3} Do not look favorably upon the one wearing glamorous clothing, saying you be seated well, and to the poor saying you stand there or sit on

my footstool, ^{2:4} If you make a distinction in yourself have you not become judges reasoning with evil motives?

It seems to me that James must have experienced some of these things in his time. He calls upon his readers to recognize the insidious and “evil” nature of preferential treatment. Some might object that the situation that James addresses is different than the one I recounted above. Is it really? The best seat in the house for anyone is the one they like the best. I wonder if Governor Perry had walked in and sat down, or Cliff Kingsbury had walked in and sat down in your favorite seat, would you ask them to move, or would you relish the moment? “Partiality” is evil, at least according to James, and he is going to unpack what is meant by this later on in his letter, but deep down we all know it is evil. Whenever we treat someone in a fashion that causes separation, pain, or causes them to leave, because of our own selfishness have we honored a savior that left heaven to pursue those living in the filth and squalor of their sin? This is surely a part of what James meant at the end of chapter one about not being stained by the world, not allowing the world to put its dirty smudge on us. The world is always assessing people, sizing them

up, measuring them, establishing pecking order: God, who sees and loves all alike wants the church to reflect that generous love in how it behaves. God wants the church to be a beacon of his attitude, and not the attitude of selfish human nature. In some parts of the early church they had a rule that if a regular member of the church came in an usher would seat them; but if a stranger came in, and particularly a poor stranger, the bishop of the church would leave his chair and go to the door to welcome the newcomer.¹ Perhaps this is a rule that it would be good for us to ponder today?

James begins his line of reasoning by warning his audience of trying to combine faith and prejudice; starting with the command not to show prejudice. There is no place in true faith in Jesus Christ for making social distinctions.² These social distinctions are made based upon the jewelry and clothing worn by those coming into the assembly (συναγωγή). The assumption is here, and not just here, but elsewhere, that you can tell who is a

¹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, In the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 13-14.

² Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 2008), p. 106.

poor person by what they wear. Based upon these judgments seats were assigned with the rich being given the good seats while the poor are humiliated, or at least ranked in a submissive position (Psalm 99:5; 110:1; 132:7; Isaiah 66:1; Lamentations 2:1).³ This act of judgement takes the place that is only God's position, of being the only true judge, and doing what Jesus told people not to do (John 7:24), at least not to do it improperly merely based upon appearances.

^{2:5} Listen my beloved brothers; has God not chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom he promised to those loving him? ^{2:6} But you dishonor the poor. Is it not the rich oppressing you and they dragging you into court? ^{2:7} Do they not blaspheme the good name of the one calling to you?

James goes beyond simply insisting upon equality of treatment and hints at something that he will develop later: This is the fact that the rich are likely to be those that are the oppressors of the poor, and even persecutors of the church. It is the same with every justice system that does not take great care, the rich control the justice system. The rich can hire the best

³ Ralph P. Martin, *James*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 48 (Nashville TN: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1988), p. 62.

lawyers and they might even be able to bribe people to get what they want. They lobby, give campaign donations, and get their way while the poor are powerless to do anything.⁴ In light of this God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. It falls to them, that God gives the inheritance of the kingdom. James appears to be aware that some in his audience are guilty of dishonoring the poor, the heirs of the kingdom. He then seeks to redress the balance and remind them of the exploitation of the rich. It is they who drag people to court, not the poor who are powerless and unable to do so. They even appear to be against the church, blaspheming the name of Christ. Why then give deference to the enemies of God's church and the heirs of his kingdom? He challenges them to see the world through the eyes of God and not through the eyes of the world.

^{2:8} If, however, you fulfill the royal law according to what is written, love your neighbor as yourself, you do well. ^{2:9} But if you show partiality, you are convicted of sin by the law as a transgressor. ^{2:10} For whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles on one part, becomes guilty of all. ^{2:11} For the one saying, "you

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 14-15.

must not commit adultery,” he also said, “you must not murder;” but if you do not commit adultery but you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

James continues to indicate to his audience the right path, citing the need to obey the royal law of loving your neighbor. He commends this as something that is good and that doing this, is something that should be done. Doing, some, good is not enough, if in one instance you keep part of what is right and in another instance you go against God by showing favoritism. How hard it is for human beings not to show favoritism, especially when it comes to something that is beneficial to oneself. James here equates favoritism with being a lawbreaker and he goes on to indicate that if you break one law you are guilty of breaking it all. Here James indicates that he is totally at home in the world of Judaism. The goal of the Jewish law, for those who followed it, was to carry out all of it, and not just part of it. The breaking of one command places a person in the position of being a transgressor of the Law. This precept is clearly demonstrated in the world of Judaism: “Cursed is every man, who does not abide in all the words of this law to do them, and all the people say,

“may it be so.” (The Septuagint Deuteronomy 27:26). The community of Qumran had a similar conviction: “And anyone of the men of the Community, the covenant of the Community, who insolently shuns anything at all commanded, cannot approach the pure food of the men of holiness” (1QS 8:16-17).⁵

The teaching of Jesus respects this same emphasis on the importance of upholding the whole Law: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:17-20 NRSV. The issue here is not the observance of the letter of every minuscule aspect of the Law in some form of legalistic, formulaic manner. What is in view

⁵ Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, in the *Sacra Pagina* series, vol. 14 (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), pp. 135-136.

here is the overarching view of the purpose of the Law. The Law represents God's will for humanity. That one must "keep" the whole Law means that one must orient their life toward carrying out God's will in totality in their life. This is the vision, the goal of the person oriented toward keeping the Law. They strive to be, and to do what God has called them to be and to do. Every command then becomes an expression of, not only obedience to God, but devotion and trust in God.⁶

2:12 Thus speak and act as one who is be judged by the law of liberty. 2:13 For merciless judgement will come to the one not being merciful; mercy triumphs over judgement.

James then calls upon his readers to speak and act in a certain way: in a way that recognizes that they are judged by "the law of liberty." It is perhaps here that we have the clearest indication that James has two different laws in mind. James returns here to the "law of liberty" that was first introduced in 1:25 as a positive contrast to the Law of verse 10-11.⁷ Confusion can easily come here, if we do not see James speaking and


⁶ Patrick J. Hartin, *James*, p. 136.

⁷ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 119.

contrasting the Torah with the “Law of Liberty.” James sees clearly, even at this early stage of the church, that there are some who want to pick and choose what they will obey and what they will disregard as if somehow the new covenant represents some type of holy smorgasbord where any part will bring nourishment to the soul, sustaining it, and that it is all up to individual preference what parts to take and what parts to leave. Instead James sees the law as like a sheet of glass, that if it is broken, is completely broken, and not just a little broken. It is this same way with other things such as a flat tire, that when flat is not just a little flat. It appears that some in James’s audience were trying to drive on a flat tire, the flat tire of social prestige rather than upon the fully inflated tire of loving one’s neighbor. They were trying to stop the cold wind coming in the their house with a broken sheet of glass that was shattered and had fallen into pieces.⁸

James here confronts a paradox in verse 13. The mercy of God is sovereign. It will overcome, but the moment a person says, “Oh well, that is all right, God will forgive me, so it does not

⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 15.



matter what I do,” and in particular when what I do is to discriminate against the poor; then it is at that point when because the mercy I am relying upon is God’s, he must act in judgement. God will not forever tolerate a world in which mercy is not the ultimate rule of life. “Mercy” is not the same thing at all as shoulder-shrugging tolerance where anything goes. Anything does most certainly not go. Certainly arrogance, corruption, blasphemy, favoritism and lawbreaking of any kind does not go. If God were to be merciful to such things then he would be deeply unmerciful to the poor, the helpless, the widow and the orphan. Everything about the gospel message insists that this is not the case at all.⁹

At the beginning, it is the case that churches were made up mostly of those who were poor. Some have even referred to this early church community as the brotherhood of the poor. In the time that the Epistle of James is written the church is still made up mostly of the poor. In this letter, it appears that the rich are either not members of the Christian community at all, or that James does not think they are genuinely a part. Of the three

⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 16.

contexts in which they are explicitly named, in two they are named as oppressors (2:6; 5:1-6), and in the third they are condemned to failure in all their pursuits (1:11). James makes it clear that this judgment comes because they oppress others. It seems that in this early church, which began as a poor church, the Christian community began to open up widely to those who were rich, a development that James did not look upon with favor. James insists that the vocation of the church, its mission, is to the poor, who are rich in faith, and thus heirs to the kingdom of God (2:5).¹⁰

The teachings of James here very much echoes those of Jesus in his Beatitudes. Emphasis there is placed on the poor, the weak, the humble and those with broken spirits, but also on those that know how to show forgiveness and mercy as described in the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:12¹¹, 14-15¹²). For James it is clear that God applies the measure that we use for others to us, and if

¹⁰ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, Revised edition (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), pp. 24-26.

¹¹ **And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** NRSV.

¹² **For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.** NRSV.

we are not forgiving and merciful with others then God will not be forgiving and merciful to us. This includes, how we use the wealth and blessings that we have. This is a message that is also powerfully demonstrated in the Parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35). Especially take note of verses 34 and 35.¹³ The whole gospel insists that mercy must be a shining beacon in the lives of God's people and if it is not then those people are not God's obedient people.¹⁴

^{2:14} What is the advantage, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works? Is that faith able to save him? ^{2:15} If a brother or a sister is naked and lacking daily food, ^{2:16} and one out of you says, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," and does not give the necessary food for the stomach what benefit is it? ^{2:17} so also faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.

James then moves to drive his point home in such a way that shows the link between faith and action. James makes it clear that faith cannot be simply an intellectual exercise or mere

¹³ **And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."** NRSV.


¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 16.

intellectual assent, it must be more than this, it must produce real, palpable, action. In our western world, and our era, it is so often the case that we have spiritualized the gospel message and elevated the spiritual aspect of the gospel to such a height that our faith is so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use. Such a faith is foreign to James and more than foreign it is useless, pointless, and the figment of a delusional mind. Faith that is really faith will be plainly seen in the actions that are more than words.

^{2:18} But someone will say, “You have faith, I also have works; show me your faith apart from works, and I will show you my works of faith. ^{2:19} Because you believe God is one, you believe well, also the demons believe and they shudder. ^{2:20} Do you wish to know, empty man, that faith without works is useless? ^{2:21} Was not our father Abraham by works justified by offering his son Isaac upon the altar? ^{2:22} You see that his faith worked together with his works and out of the works his faith was perfected, ^{2:23} And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Now Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness and he was called a friend of God.” ^{2:24} You see that out of works a man is

justified and not out of faith alone. ^{2:25} Likewise, was it not the case that Rahab the prostitute out of works was justified, when receiving the messengers she sent them out by another way? ^{2:26} For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

James had already begun addressing this issue in chapter one when he spoke of people who hear the word but do not do it. Perhaps it is the case that he has heard people talking about their faith, not meaning a rich, lively trust in God, but rather an empty, vaporous, etherial affirmation that is nothing but an empty husk, a bare acknowledgment, a body without a spirit, dead, rotting and stinking. That is what James thinks of faith without genuine works, because he knows that genuine faith cannot help but produce action, change, transformation. There is no way for genuine faith to leave its recipient unchanged, they will become a part of the mission of God in powerful, deep, impactful ways that express the royal law, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Simply saying, "God is one," is not enough. It may be truth, but truth must be accepted and become action. The demons know, and believe, that God is one, but the only action that this produces in



them is a shuddering fear, not transformation, not repentance, not mercy and therefore, not salvation. It merely scares them out of their wits. Real faith reveals itself as Jesus-shaped action.¹⁵

Translating faith into Jesus-shaped action is downright dangerous. When faith is dangerous and costly, that is when it is real, and that is when it really matters. That is the faith that saves, creates, transforms and focuses the creative power of God to begin in that place, and at that time, the work of the new creation. This is near to the heart of the message of James: the challenge to make absolutely certain that the faith of the believer is the real thing, that it actually does what God says genuine faith must always do.¹⁶ Genuine faith must always recreate, just as the power of God that we see, in Genesis one, created the universe in which we live and all that inhabit it real faith accesses the creative power of God that recreates that universe and transforms it into what the heart of God desires it, ultimately to be.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 19.

Synopsis

James begins this chapter addressing the issue of favoritism, particularly favoritism based upon perceptions of earthly wealth and clearly defines this as evil and the stealing the place of God. He calls upon those in the church not only to recognize this as evil but challenges the precepts upon which it takes place. He challenges those of the church to recognize that this is not the way that God sees the people of the world and that very much the opposite God favors the poor, giving them rich faith and the inheritance of the kingdom. James also reminds them that it is the rich who drag the poor into court, who are responsible for persecuting the church, and even blaspheming the name of Christ.

James then goes onto to challenge his audience with reasoning that is very Jewish in nature, the letter is after all addressed to a Jewish audience. He challenges them to recognize that partial compliance to the law makes them in reality transgressors of the law and therefore guilty before the law. Partial compliance to the law of freedom does the same. Though he is not calling for absolute perfection James is calling on his

audience to have a single-minded devotion to the causes that strives for perfection in all instances and in every aspect of life. All of this discussion is to be based in the mercy of God and the recognition that that mercy is to be a central feature of the life of the Christian. The church is called upon to be a beacon of mercy in a world of condemnation and judgment.

James is always very practical and here he challenges his audience to recognize that genuine faith can be seen by the action that it will produce. Faith will produce works and truth a faith that does not produce works is useless, pointless and without any sense of genuineness before God. He challenges them to demonstrate their faith through their actions and to recognize this is the nature of saving faith. He gives the example of Abraham and Rahab to demonstrate his point. For James it is clearly the case that faith and works are inseparable parts of a whole and one cannot be real without the other. Just as works without genuine faith is useless so is faith without works.

Questions

1. What is favoritism?
2. How do you recognize favoritism?
3. How can favoritism be eradicated?
4. How does God deal with the favoritism of humanity?
5. What are we to make of the statement of James in verse 5 regarding God's attitude toward the poor?
6. What is the "royal law?"
7. What was the role of the Law supposed to be among the nation of Israel?
8. How does mercy relate to law?
9. How does mercy relate to us today in our relationship with God?
10. What is the relationship between faith and works?
11. How does your faith change the way you live and the way that you see the world?
12. How can the church help us to be people of true faith today?