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WHY PARTIALITY IS WRONG

(Part 2)

James 2:8-13

By

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James Lesson 9

Why Partiality is Wrong (Part 2) James 2:8-13

One Saturday morning when we lived in Southern California, we drove down from our mountain town to do some shopping in San Bernardino. When we got into town, to our horror we saw a large group of white-robed, pointed-hat Ku Klux Klan holding a rally at the park! It sent shivers down our spines! Sadly, racism is alive and well in America. Shamefully, it is often promoted by professing Bible-believing Christians. Most Klan chapters have chaplains, many of whom disgracefully are Baptist ministers!

How can those who claim to know Christ so flagrantly disregard the plain command of James 2:1: "My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism"? The sad fact is that evangelical churches are often the most racially segregated place in America. As James says (3:10), "My brethren, these things ought not to be this way."

The New Testament church was radically counter-cultural. It consisted of Jews and Greeks, slaves and slave-owners, worshiping together. Some have criticized the New Testament for not strongly condemning slavery. But if it had put an emphasis there, the gospel would have become eclipsed by the anti-slavery message, and Christianity could have been stamped out as a revolutionary movement that threatened the cultural status quo. Rather, by proclaiming the gospel and by exhorting both slaves and slave-owners to regard each other as brothers in God's family, the institution of slavery was eroded from within.

James was particularly addressing the problem of showing partiality to the rich and disregarding the poor, but his words apply to any sort of partiality based on external factors: "But if you show partiality, you are committing sin" (2:9). That seems pretty clear! And yet because we all tend to congratulate ourselves for not committing certain "big" sins, while we shrug off our "little" sins as no big deal, this problem of partiality still plagues the church. So James' teaching here is relevant for our times.

Last week we looked at the first two reasons for why partiality is wrong: it usurps God's sovereignty (2:1-5), and it aligns you with God's enemies (2:6-7). Today we come to the third reason (2:8-13):

Partiality is wrong because it violates God's law of love.

Here's the flow of thought: To show partiality violates the second great commandment of God's law, to love your neighbor as yourself. To break God's law is sin and to break even one part of it is to break the whole. Since God's law will be the standard by which everyone will be judged, we should live in light of that coming judgment, especially by showing mercy to the poor.

1. God's law is love, but partiality violates that law (2:8-9).

In verse 8, James seems to be anticipating his readers' objections: "James, by showing the rich man to the best seat, we're only following the biblical injunction to show proper honor where honor is due! After all, if we were rich, that's how we would want to be treated. We're just following the golden rule!"

With tongue in cheek, James says, "That's fine! If you claim to be fulfilling God's law of love, you're doing well! Keep it up!" As his readers begin to congratulate themselves, James lands the knockout punch (2:9), "But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

James calls the law "the royal law." Primarily, this means that it comes from the King, the Lord Jesus Christ. It emphasizes the authority of the law. James has just mentioned (2:5) that believers are heirs of the kingdom. As such, we must live under the law of the king. So "the royal law" probably refers to "the whole law as interpreted and handed over to the church in the teaching of Jesus" (Peter Davids, *New International Greek Testament Commentary on James* [Eerdmans], p. 114). That law is contained in Scripture. The Bible is our authoritative rule of life. It reveals God's will for how we should think and live. So we should always read and study it with a view to how it applies to our daily lives.

James singles out the command from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This is cited six times in the synoptic gospels, and also in Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14. Jesus referred to it as the second great command, after, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and

with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). He added (22:40), "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." Just prior to the command to love our neighbor, Moses wrote (Lev. 19:15), "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly." So part of biblical love for one's neighbor includes treating each person fairly and impartially.

Modern "Christian" psychology has taken the command to love your neighbor as yourself to mean that we are commanded to love ourselves. In fact, they contend that if we do not love ourselves properly, we cannot love either God or our neighbor properly. So the first item of business is to focus on loving yourself!

However, there are only *two* great commandments, not three: (1) Love God; (2) love your neighbor. Love of self is assumed as the standard by which we must love our neighbor. John Calvin saw this centuries ago when he wrote (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press], II:VII:54, pp. 417-418):

And obviously, since men were born in such a state that they are all too much inclined to self-love—and however much they deviate from truth, they still keep self-love—there was no need of a law that would increase or rather enkindle this already excessive love. Hence it is very clear that we keep the commandments not by loving ourselves but by loving God and neighbor; ...

Indeed, to express how profoundly we must be inclined to love our neighbors [Lev. 19:18], the Lord measured it by the love of ourselves because he had at hand no more violent or stronger emotion than this.

So the point of the second great commandment is, you care about your own needs; show the same care for the needs of others. You care about your own feelings; show the same care for the feelings of others. You care about your own desires; show the same care for the desires of others. You care about how others treat you; treat them as you would want to be treated.

But, in case anyone doesn't get it, James goes on (2:9) to apply the law of love specifically to partiality. To show partiality to the rich while you treat the poor with contempt, or to show partiality

to a certain race, while treating those of another race as inferior, is to commit sin. In case we didn't understand those plain words, James adds, you "are convicted by the law as transgressors." Guilty!

Like a brilliant trial attorney, James knew that his readers would try to squirm out from under this guilty verdict by saying, "Well, okay, maybe we've not treated everyone fairly, but it's not that big of a deal. After all, we haven't been committing adultery. We haven't been murdering people. We keep the important commandments of the law, even if we haven't always treated the poor as we should have." Anticipating this dodge, James continues,

2. To violate God's law on any level is a serious matter (2:10-11).

"For" shows that James is buttressing his argument from 2:9. He argues that if anyone keeps the entire law (something that no one has ever done, but for sake of argument, he assumes that it is possible), but stumbles in one point, he is guilty of all. In other words, the law is a unity, like a chain. A single broken link breaks the chain. Or, the law is like a mirror or window. A single, small crack means that it is broken.

We would be wrong to conclude from this that all the commands in the law are of equal importance, or that all sins are equal. Jesus said that the weightier provisions of the law are justice, mercy, and faithfulness, thus implying that other matters, such as tithing table spices, are less important (Matt. 23:23). The apostle Paul implied that sexual sins are worse than some other sins when he said (1 Cor. 6:18), "Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body." Mental lust is sin, but it is worse sin to commit immorality. Mental anger is sin, but it is worse sin to murder someone.

But James' point is, whatever the sin, it renders you a lawbreaker. You can be a good person in every other way, but if you break the law, you are a lawbreaker. For example, if a man is guilty of murder, when he goes before the court it does not matter if he has been a faithful husband and father, has never had a traffic ticket, has never robbed a bank, or has never beat up his neighbor. All that matters is, did he commit murder? If so, he is guilty of breaking the law.

Why does James bring up (2:11) these two commandments, adultery and murder, and why does he mention them in the reverse order that they occur in the Ten Commandments? We can't be certain. It may be that James again is anticipating the way his readers would respond to his argument thus far. They may have thought, "Well, I may be guilty of partiality towards the poor, but at least I've been faithful to my wife!" So James mentions that first.

He may go on to mention murder to imply that to commit partiality is to commit murder. Discrimination against the poor and failure to love one's neighbor is sometimes associated with murder. For example, Jeremiah 22:3 states, "Thus says the Lord, 'Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. Also do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place.'" (See also, Jer. 7:6; Amos 8:4; 1 John 3:15.) So James is saying, "Don't dismiss partiality as no big deal! It is a big deal, just as adultery and murder are big sins."

There is one other aspect of James' argument here, the phrase, "He who said," which refers to God. Douglas Moo (*The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], pp. 114-115) comments,

If we view the law as a series of individual commandments, we could assume that disobedience of a particular commandment incurred guilt for that commandment only. But, in fact, the individual commandments are part and parcel of one indivisible whole, because they reflect the will of the one Law-giver. To violate a commandment is to disobey God himself and render a person guilty before him.

At this point, however, modern readers of James may raise the question, "If any violation of God's law is serious, then does this mean that we must observe *all* of the ceremonial commandments about food and cleansing? As believers under grace, how do we know which commandments apply to us today?"

Moo (p. 115) raises this question and says that James' citation of two of the Ten Commandments suggests that he was thinking only of some parts of the Old Testament law. He explains (p. 116),

It is not the OT law per se that he urges perfect compliance with, but "the royal law" (v. 8), "the law of liberty" (v. 12; cf.

1:25). This “law” takes up within it the OT law, but as understood through Jesus’ fulfillment of it. And so just as Jesus’ apparent unqualified endorsement of the law (Matt. 5:18-19...) is tempered in the context by his claim to be the fulfiller of the law (v. 17), so James applies this standard point about the law’s unity to the law as reinterpreted by Jesus

But, someone may ask, what about Sabbath-keeping, which was part of the Ten Commandments? Are Christians obligated to observe the Sabbath commandment today? Many evangelical Christians believe that if you go out to dinner or read the paper or watch TV or mow your lawn on Sunday, you have violated the Sabbath and are guilty of breaking God’s law.

I devoted an entire message to this subject (“God’s Day of Rest,” December 17, 1995, on the church web site). I can only answer briefly here. My view is that while we are not obligated to observe Sunday as a Christian Sabbath in a legalistic manner (with a list of prohibited activities), there is a principle that applies today, namely, that we should devote the Lord’s Day to Him as a day of worship and rest from our normal labors. I think that God designed that principle so that we would not neglect worshiping Him and also for our benefit, because we need to cease from our normal duties and spend time with the Lord and His people. When we view it as a day set aside to honor the Lord and spend extra time with Him, it won’t be a duty, but a delight.

But let’s return to the issue that James is dealing with specifically, to show partiality is to violate God’s law of love. That, James argues, is a serious matter, because it renders you guilty before God. He concludes,

3. We must speak and act as those who will stand before God for judgment (2:12-13).

James makes two points here:

A. Believers will be judged by the law of liberty (2:12).

Some may wonder, “I thought that believers would not be judged at all, since Christ bore our judgment on the cross. What does it mean, then, to be judged by the law of liberty?”

Jesus said (John 5:24), "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." The apostle Paul states clearly (Rom. 8:1), "Therefore there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." These and other similar verses show that Christ bore the punishment that we deserve for our sins. If we have trusted in Him, we will not face God's eternal wrath at the final judgment (the "great white throne" judgment, Rev. 20:11-15).

But even though we do not need to fear that awful judgment if we are in Christ, Paul wrote (2 Cor. 5:10), "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." (See also, Rom. 14:10-12.) The word *bad* literally means, *worthless*. Our sins have been judged and removed from us through the death of Christ. But our lives as believers will undergo the Lord's heart-level evaluation. Those things that were done out of love for Christ and for His glory will be rewarded. Those things that were done out of selfish motives are worthless in God's sight and will be burned as wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

Commenting on 2 Corinthians 5:10 and anticipating the next section in James, Philip Hughes writes (*Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [Eerdmans], p. 183),

It is worth remarking that a passage like this shows that, so far from there being discord, there is an essential agreement between the teaching of Paul and that of James on the subject of faith and works. The justification of the sinner, it is true, is by faith in Christ and not by works of his own; but the hidden root of faith must bring forth the visible fruit of good works.

James again refers to the law as "the law of liberty" (see 1:25). He may use this term to point to the fact of the new covenant that Jesus inaugurated. Rather than keeping the external rules of the old law, the new commandment of love is written on our hearts. Thus there is a new motivation, to do everything that we do out of love for God and for others.

When James says, "So speak and so act," he is referring to our total conduct. Words alone are not enough, because it is easy to say to a poor brother, "Be warmed and be filled" (James 2:16). Our words need to be accompanied with godly actions. James is telling us to live in light of the fact that we will soon stand before Jesus Christ, who will reward us for our faithful obedience, but also save us through the fire as our worthless deeds go up in smoke.

- B. Those who refuse to show mercy to others will face God's merciless judgment, but those who show mercy will receive mercy (2:13).

As I understand it, the first part of 2:13 refers to unbelievers, whereas the last part refers to believers. Keep in mind, though, that the unbelievers described in the first part of the verse may profess to know Christ and be in the church. But their deeds show them to be those with dead faith, not genuine saving faith (as James will go on to explain). If you profess to know Christ, but do not show mercy to those who are needy, your profession is worthless. When you stand before God, we will not receive mercy (see Matt. 18:23-35). You don't want to go there!

Showing mercy to others demonstrates that you have already received mercy from God. As Jesus said (Matt. 5:7), "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." He did not mean that we earn or merit mercy by showing it to others. Mercy, by definition, is unearned! Rather, mercy flows to others from those who have received it from God. They will receive mercy in its fullness at the final judgment.

The last half of 2:13 refers to believers. There is debate about whether "mercy" refers to God's mercy or to the mercy we show to others. If it refers to God's mercy, it means, "While setting forth a strict standard, conformity to his holy law, as the basis of judgment, God ultimately is a God of mercy, who also provides in his grace a means of escaping that judgment" (Moo, p. 118). If it refers to the mercy we show to others, it means that when we are merciful toward others, we demonstrate "a heart made right by the work of God's grace" (*ibid.*). In a way, these two ideas blend together, in that our attempts to show mercy are always imperfect. Thus we must finally fall back on God's mercy to us in Christ, which will triumph over judgment in our salvation.

Conclusion

After part one of this message on partiality last week, I received the following note from a teenager in the church. She said,

Dear Pastor Cole, I enjoyed and learned from your sermon. I can relate to what you were saying in my age group, because kids my age often are judgmental about clothes and not being "in." The "dorky" kids can be left out. But as sisters and brothers in Christ, as you said, we should not be judgmental of outward factors and appearances to our fellow Christians. So I learned from that. Thank you for this thoughtful sermon.

She went on to thank me for writing an answer to another question that she had asked. That note made my day! She took God's Word and applied it specifically to a very practical issue in her daily life.

That's what we all should do with James' admonition here. I don't know exactly how you need to apply it, but the Holy Spirit does. If you think about it and ask Him to apply it to your heart, you will grow in practical deeds of love for those whom you might naturally despise or disregard. As you love your neighbor as yourself, you are fulfilling the royal law of the King!

Application Questions

1. Do those with "low self-esteem" need to learn to love themselves more? Why/why not? What is their real need?
2. What role do feelings play in biblical love? Is biblical love only an action, or does it demand feelings, too, if it's genuine?
3. How does living under grace fit in with living in view of the judgment?
4. If God's commands are not of equal importance, why is it a serious matter to disregard the less important ones?

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