



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Partiality v. Mercy (James 2:1-13)

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James 2:1-13 - My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² 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, ³ 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," ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ 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? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? ⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹ 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. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

I. THE SIN OF PARTIALITY (2:1-7)

When we display partiality, we assign value. Assigning differing values to people is most likely based on the question, "What can this person do for me?" In the church context, this is a serious warning about how we treat those who enter our doors, because obviously, a rich person has so much more to offer to an organization that takes donations. In a broader sense, we must ask ourselves if we treat people in our individual lives based on the same criteria.

Verse three speaks of paying attention (translated "respect" in the King James) to one who is well-dressed. The original word for this meant "to gaze at or look at intently". Who has our attention and how do we communicate that they have value to us? I'm sure you've been in a conversation with someone who, even though they are talking to you, is looking past you to see who else is in the room. You don't have their attention and they are sending the strong message that someone else is more valuable to them. Their gaze is on someone else. If you're like me, you've done that to others as well.

Several factors may cause us to give more attention to someone, but money has always been an indicator of importance.

Money is not inherently evil, of course; but if it is used as a measure of personal worth, either consciously or unconsciously, then we have fallen prey to the standards of our culture. In ways subtle and obvious we do crave status and wealth. We are also overly impressed by other markers of social standing such as attire, profession, and even social polish. James would warn us against the subtle power these cultural markers may have over the Christian community.¹

Another strong argument against this kind of favoritism is the nature of the gospel of Christ. No matter who you are, you are made in the image of God, have value and are in need of forgiveness and redemption.

Romans 3:21-23 But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

This way of thinking is also opposite of God's own ways. Over and over through Scripture, we can see how God views the people He has made and it is clear that He is not partial or ever deals with people with inequity or unfairness.

FOR GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY.

ROMANS 2:11

II. THE STANDARD OF SCRIPTURE (2:8-11)

Partiality is plainly presented in this passage as a sin and we have already seen some arguments for this truth. The nature of man, the nature of the gospel and the mind of God himself prove that being impartial is to be avoided. James takes the time, though, to give another reason. When we hold our actions and attitudes up to the

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yardstick of the Bible, we have to be impartial. Why? What does the Bible say?

Leviticus 19:18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

The principle of treating others as we like to be treated reaches back to Old Testament law. We naturally love ourselves and protect our feelings, but how are we doing with considering someone else's well-being in how they are treated? What is it to be a good neighbor?

Interestingly, this same question was posed to Jesus and he responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man was beaten and could have been helped by a couple of accomplished men in the community. But the one who stopped to help was just a Samaritan (someone not highly thought of in Jewish society). Jesus was saying that our neighbor is always around us and always has needs that we should seek to meet if we can.

As it relates to our passage, the man who comes to a gathering in shabby clothes is a neighbor and deserves to be considered worthy of our attention to help. His ability to help us or pay us back has no bearing whatsoever. We should seek to honor all and avoid the tendency to treat someone with respect only if they can do something for us.

One more important principle here is that we are all lawbreakers. The law that God established proves that we sin because, according to this section, if you break one of God's laws you are guilty of it all. We all fall short and will not be judged on a curve when our lives are over. As we said earlier, we are all in need of forgiveness.

III. THE SUPERIORITY OF MERCY (2:12, 13)

When we make snap determinations of people based on their looks, economic status, position in society or whatever, we have become judges. The last phrase of today's passage lays out our choices: mercy or judgment.

God is our ultimate judge and if we set a pattern in our thinking to judge others with no mercy, we will be judged in the same way

In this context, the "one who has shown no mercy" obviously refers to unbelievers. Their lives are characterized by partiality, hardness, selfishness, and a lack of concern for others – in short, lovelessness. They are far from loving others as they love themselves, reflecting nothing of God's love and care for those in need. They will not be blessed or receive mercy, for they have not been merciful.²

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL, FOR THEY SHALL RECEIVE MERCY.

MATTHEW 5:7

IN THE CAPITOL

Throughout this study we have considered terms like "respect", "attention", "mercy" and "impartiality". When you think of the context of political relationships, how does this apply? Do people in your life receive preferential treatment simply because they can give you something in return? What about the person in need who just cannot get justice from others around them?

No matter what our position is in this world, the example of Christ and mandate of the Scriptures point us to a mindset of equity when dealing with others. To be partial and reject a neighbor is sin and a violation of biblical commands. God help us all to be mindful of the importance of seeing the value in each person we encounter.

¹ David Nystrom, *The NIV Application Commentary: James* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 131.

² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody) 1998, 117.