

Derek Radney
Associate Pastor
Calvary Baptist Church
August 2nd, 2009

James 2:1-13 – Blessed are the Poor and the Merciful

I. Introduction:

A. What does it mean to be poor? Why is there poverty? How do you feel about people who are poor?

A. Poverty is a tricky issue, especially in America.

1. There are three reasons people end up in poverty, other than being born into it:
 - a. They have sinned and the consequences lead them into poverty.
 - b. Others have sinned and acted unjustly, leading to poverty.
 - c. Because we live in a world under a curse because of Adam's sin, people lose what they have due to natural disasters, people support others die, or there is famine.
2. Most of the poverty in biblical times was related to injustice in society and famine.
3. Thus, the poor in the Ancient Near East were often despised, not because they were associated with rampant sin, but because they were not the ones with power.
4. Today in America, in a nation where we tend to think that if a person wants to, they can work and pick themselves up out of poverty, we despise the poor because we think they deserve to be poor.
5. That being said, it is easy to think, then, that we are justified in despising the poor, for they live off of what other people work for when they could just work themselves.
6. But, this thinking is wrong, because poverty is complex and it is always related to sin.

C. **Fallen Condition Focus:**

1. Instead of showing mercy to the poor, we self-righteously look down on the poor, forgetting that anyone that is rich is rich by God's grace.
2. Poverty is always the result of someone's sin, and it is usually a combination of a number of factors.
 - a. Those born into poverty usually grow up in an environment of poverty that leads them to believe that the system is against them.
 - b. They also usually do experience injustice at the hand of society in some form because the world sees them as responsible for their poverty.
 - c. Finally, this cycle usually continues as those born into poverty tend to perpetuate the behavior that is destructive to prosperous living.
3. Christians must remember that we have been shown mercy before we met any conditions, but the mercy we were shown came with conditions that brought change in our lives.
4. All those born into wealth need to recognize how many resources they have graciously been given that they are unaware of:
 - a. networks of help
 - b. money
 - c. opportunities
 - d. a system that works for them
 - e. stability
 - f. usually family consistency
 - g. education

II. Organization:

- A. Context: Today's text continues to focus on having an undivided faith by being doers of the word, but James focuses in on how this will play out with respect to the rich/poor dynamic of the churches to which he is writing.
- B. **Organizational Sentence:** We will begin by looking at the general exhortation of the passage, then we will see a hypothetical example of the problem this exhortation deals with, and then we will see the three reasons why James thinks they should obey his command.
 1. Command: Show no partiality.
 2. A Hypothetical Example: Two guys walk into a worship service...
 3. Three Reasons: 1) God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith, 2) The rich oppress the poor in the church, 3) Partiality is against the Law and is unloving.

III. Command: Show no partiality. (James 2.1)

James 2:1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

- A. Again James begins a new issue by addressing his reader with 'My Brothers.'
- B. James explicitly states that Christians are not to show favoritism, partiality, discrimination.
 1. Some translations read, "Do not hold to your faith with an attitude of favoritism."
 2. Favoritism is against the faith we hold in the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - a. Favoritism is to honor people a certain way because of an external factor like dress, skin color, or general physical appearance.
 - b. The Old Testament teaches that God looks at the heart, and not at the external appearance.
 - c. In this case, James extends the idea of favoritism/partiality to the social status of a person.
 3. Why is favoritism/partiality against the faith? Because to honor someone above others because of some quality about them, whether it be appearance or social status, fails to line-up with God's impartiality.
- C. James here speaks of Jesus as, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ.' This is not an uncommon title. However, to call him, 'The Lord of glory' is rare.
 1. Why call him this here, right after calling him the Lord Jesus Christ?
 2. It seems that James is drawing attention to the honor that is due the Lord as opposed to the honor the churches might show to those who do not deserve it.
- D. Thus, the general command James gives is that Christians must not favor some people above others because of appearance or social status.

IV. A Hypothetical Example: A rich guy and a poor guy walk into a worship service. (James 2.2-4)

James 2:2-4 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?

- A. James then illustrates what partiality looks like in the church community. The grammar in the Greek makes it clear that this is a hypothetical situation.
- B. His example is of two guys who walk into a worship service.

1. It is interesting that James uses the term ‘synagogue’ (translated *assembly*) here to describe a church worship service.
 - a. Some have speculated that this is a courtroom situation because of the language ‘synagogue’ and ‘judges.’ But this is unlikely because James refers to this gathering as ‘your assembly.’
 - b. This tells us that Christians have control over the meeting, and thus, it is highly unlikely that Christians became so numerous in the areas James is writing to that in each place (or most places) the Jews in the synagogue converted so that now the Christians met there.
 - c. More likely, James sees a unity in the people of God, such that God’s people have always been an assembly, Old Covenant or New, and so the New Covenant community is an assembly/synagogue.
 2. The first man is a rich man from the upper class of society. We know this because he has a gold ring which signified his status.
 3. The second man is obviously poor because he enters in shabby clothing.
 4. It seems that both of these men are new converts because they need to be shown where to sit in this assembly. If they were not new converts, then they would know exactly where they fit in.
 5. The contrast James makes here is a little unclear, but it seems that he is saying the rich man is given an honored or comfortable seat while the poor man is being ignored or mistreated by being directed to the floor, which is a sign of contempt or disdain.
- C. Verse 4 really should read ‘*don’t you then have doubt in yourselves, becoming judges with evil thoughts?*’
1. The phrase ‘made distinctions’ really comes from one word which can mean discrimination/separation or doubt/waver. The context must determine the meaning.
 2. It seems that it could be intentionally ambiguous, but that the meaning ‘doubt’ is a better fit because it would go along with James’ general concern that his readers not be double-minded, filled with doubt, but rather that they be single-minded, filled with faith.
 3. His readers should not have divided hearts that leads them to show partiality. James sees a correlation between these two things.
- D. The final phrase drives home this point. If a person shows partiality, they are double-minded with a divided heart, which is why they become a judge with an evil heart.
1. Sinful humans can only judge others if they ignore their own sinfulness, because we all fail by even our own standards.
 2. Sinful humans can only judge others if they ignore God’s standards and come up with their own.
 3. This is what we do when we show partiality. We do not have faith in Christ’s righteousness alone, but rather, we are double-minded with some confidence in our own adherence to some arbitrary standard that we create.
- E. **Applications:** How do we fail today in similar ways?
1. When we seek to know or be known by the powerful, wealthy, influential, and successful in our church, we honor the ‘rich’ above the poor.
 2. When we pay attention to those who have it all together and we neglect those who are awkward and broken, we honor the ‘rich’ over the poor.

3. You see, at the root of this issue is us relating to other people because of what we can get from them rather than out of loving concern for the needs of others. The poor, whether financially or spiritually, are draining because we have to give of ourselves. But this is exactly what we are called to do.

V. Three Reasons not to show partiality (James 2.5-13)

A. James now turns to supporting his command by giving three reasons why Christians are not to show partiality.

B. Reason #1: God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. (v.5-6a)

James 2:5-6a 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.

1. Partiality towards the rich is wrong, first of all, because it goes against God's own attitude towards the poor, as is revealed in his election of so many poor people.
2. Notice the language of election here. James says that God has chosen those who are poor.
 - a. This raises all sorts of questions. Does this mean all poor people are chosen by God and that God condemns all the rich? Does this mean that God chose people because of some quality they possessed?
 - b. First, this is not an unqualified affirmation of the poor. James is not saying that all people who are poor will be saved by faith. There are too many passages that show us wealthy followers of Christ or of YHWH.
 - i. The poor in Scripture are often but not always equated with 'the righteous.' The word has spiritual as well as material implications. The opposite of poor can be 'rich' or it can be 'wicked'.
 - ii. Like I have said before, the poor are an ambiguous group that include many of the materially poor but is made up of all those who are spiritually poor.
 - iii. Thus, it is common that the materially rich lack faith because they are dependant upon their wealth rather than God. But, the rich can have faith by recognizing their spiritual poverty, which then leads them to use their wealth to bless others.
 - iv. So, this is not an implicit condemnation of the rich and universal acceptance of all the materially poor.
 - v. But, in general, the poor are able to place their hope and trust in God much more easily than the rich. There is a surprising reversal of the world's values and standards, such that those who are poor in the eyes of the world are actually the truly rich persons.
 - c. Second, we must affirm that God does not choose people because of something about them or because they meet some criteria. The bible explicitly teaches that God chooses people based on his good pleasure alone and that he is not partial. He does not choose people because of something about them, but he does elect.
 - i. But, this then forces us to ask, how can James say this?
 - ii. The answer lies in God's providential control over the world. He has ordained that his elect would largely be made up of the materially poor.
 - iii. The world looks down on the poor, but they, surprisingly, have been chosen to be rich in faith.

- iv. God reveals the nature of his kingdom and our state as sinners by making the poor rich in faith. In doing this, the world sees that our riches and values are empty. We are forced to have our kingdom turned upside down as we repent and recognize our poverty.
- 3. James says the poor who are rich in faith are heirs of the kingdom, which he promised to those who love him.
 - a. This reminds us of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the kingdom of God,' or 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.'
 - b. Whether it is Jesus or God the Father, he promises the kingdom to those who love him, which is often the poor.
- 4. So, to summarize, we are not to show partiality because this goes against God's own attitude toward the poor.
- 5. **Application:**
 - a. We must learn from the poor. It is easy when serving the poor to think that we have it all together and we have so much to teach them. In some ways this is true, for it is possible that they are in their situation because of sinful life patterns. But, it is also true that the poor can be rich in faith because of their poverty, and we can learn much from them about trusting God. Thus, do not serve the poor without understanding the mutual benefit that occurs.
 - b. We must beware of riches. Jesus says this many times. It is hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven because we become blind to our lack of control, our dependence, and our needs.
 - c. We must all become poor. Better yet, we must all recognize our poverty and trust in Christ alone for righteousness, acceptance before God, and for hope.
 - i. If we do this, we will never look down on other people, for we will see ourselves right there next to them, equally in need of grace.
 - ii. This will enable us to forgive others, for we will see our need for forgiveness.
 - iii. We will be able to love others who hurt us, because we see ourselves as oppressors who needed grace.
 - iv. We will give away what we have to help others and seek to live simply because we understand that we are rich in Christ.

C. Reason #2: The rich oppress the poor in the church. (v.6b-

James 2:6-7 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?

- 1. Secondly, it makes no sense to favor the rich because they are the ones who frequently oppressed the poor.
- 2. This is essentially an argument of reason. The rich oppress you (he assumes the readers are mostly poor) and take advantage of your vulnerable position. Why would you favor them?
- 3. It was common for the rich in that time to be rich because of unjust gain. Tax collectors often abused their authority charging more than was warranted. Rich nobles often sued poor people for their land, bribing the court to ensure victory in the suit. Rich people often charged exorbitant interest on loans.
- 4. Evidently, many of the rich Jews in the area where these Christians lived were also insulting the poor Christians and mocking the one they followed. Thus, they were called by Christ, and the rich tended to malign their savior.

5. So, James says it makes no sense to favor those who belong to a class that typically opposes Christians.

D. Reason #3: Partiality is against the Law and is unloving.

James 2:8-13 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.

1. The main argument, which James spills the most ink on, is James' point that partiality is unloving and thus a violation of the Law of Christ.
2. Again, James talks about the Law, adding a new way of speaking about it, 'the royal Law.'
 - a. Some have argued that the royal Law means the supreme Law, which is why James talks about loving your neighbor. This doesn't quite hold up because the phrase actually means something like 'the Law belonging to the king.'
 - b. When we recognize the connection to the king and the kingdom, and when we remember the ways James has already talked about the Law, the perfect Law that brings freedom (ch.1v.25), we see that he is again talking about the Law as fulfilled in Jesus Christ.
 - c. James has no problem quoting the OT to summarize the New Covenant demands of Jesus. We are to love our neighbors. In the Old Testament, neighbors referred to fellow Israelites, but as we see from Jesus' story of the good Samaritan, neighbor has been extended to all the nations, such that we are required to love everyone God has made!
3. So, verse 8 and 9 stand in contrast to one another. To love others is to obey the Law of Christ. To show partiality is to violate this Law.
4. James points out in verse 10 that one violation of the Law makes a person guilty before the Law. This is an argument that upholds the unity of the Law. There are not divisions such that you can say that you have upheld the moral law but not the civil or ceremonial. The Law is one unified standard, and a violation of it makes you guilty before it.
 - a. Verse 11 explains why this is the case.
 - b. The same God that commands us not to commit adultery is the one who demands that we not murder.
 - c. Thus, whatever we violate is an offense against God and a violation of his standards to love one another.
 - d. However, we must remember that James is not implying obedience to the Mosaic Law in an Old Covenant way. He is not saying we must obey every Law as it is written and as it was to be obeyed under the Old Covenant.
 - e. He is saying that the Law has been fulfilled by Christ and that we must love people in every way the Law requires.
5. But why would James make this point about the unity of the Law?
 - a. It seems to me that he is trying to get across the extent of the requirement to love others.
 - b. We cannot ignore some of the people we are to love and only love some. This is partiality! We must love all our neighbors!

6. In light of the requirement, we must recognize that we will be judged. This is what verse 12 is all about.
 - a. Everyone must be judged by God on the last day.
 - b. For those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation. Believers will not be condemned at the judgment. So what will their judgment be like?
 - c. They will be judged and rewarded for what they have done according to the Law of liberty, the Law of Christ. Thus, we will be evaluated and given certain blessings accordingly. Thus, we are to act as those that will be judged.
7. But, verse 13 is an important warning. If we are not people who show mercy (and thus violate the Law), then we show ourselves to not be believers, and thus, we will come under judgment. However, those who show mercy will triumph over the judgment.
8. So, we must take very seriously the fact that we will be judged by our works. Our works reflect completed faith, and it is this kind of faith which is necessary to gain the righteousness of Christ.

VI. **Basic Message:** As those who have been humbled by the reality of their own sin and need of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, we Christians individually and as a church must not show favor to those who are rich and not discriminate against those who are poor in the eyes of the world.

- A. Jesus Christ showed us mercy while we were yet sinners. He did not place conditions upon his mercy, but offered it freely.
- B. The good news is that if we recognize that we deserve God's wrath, and if we turn in faith to Jesus who endured that wrath for us in our place, we will receive mercy.
- C. God's mercy upon us will result in God's grace. He will not leave us in brokenness. He will change us into people who show mercy to others. His mercy comes without conditions, but once it is received, we must begin to change.
- D. This is true love. Love seeks the well-being of others through self-sacrifice. It is not loving for God to allow us to remain in sin. His grace comes to us while we were yet sinners, but his grace produces change. If the changes are not there, then the initial grace is not there.