

James 1:27-2:13

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[0 : 00] James 1, verse 27. That's where we're picking things up. And we're tempted to think that when James tells his hearers to keep themselves unstained from the world,! That he means, right, enough with the sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

Stay away from the basement clubs in Soho. Nothing good happens after midnight. We saw last time, a couple of weeks ago, that he's talking about something else. What he's talking about is living as Christians according to the same values as the world around us. In 1.19 and following, James' concern was that in response to the persecution and the trials that this scattered group of believers are experiencing, that they would get drawn into a kind of revolutionary anger.

The sort of thing that we see today. When people don't get what they want, when they're badly treated, they riot, and they fight, and they even burn cities to the ground.

And it's all talked about as a kind of virtuous thing. It's one of the ways that a worldly culture responds to suffering, or indeed perceived suffering.

[1 : 26] Well, this morning, James continues on this thread. Only this time, the worldly value that he addresses, it's there in chapter 2, verse 1, is favoritism, partiality.

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. The way to get things done in the world, the way that you get ahead, often the way that you get out of trouble, is by knowing rich and powerful people.

And usually the two go together, rich and powerful. So if you can ingratiate yourself with a rich person, you can benefit. Start-up businesses, understand this.

Start-up entrepreneurs network like mad, hoping that the rich guy will invest. Or that the influential person will use their product, and they can put it on their social media.

Partiality is something that is considered a veritable positive thing in the world of start-up business. On a personal level, rich and powerful people can do things, and can get things, and can go places.

[2 : 36] And if they like having you around, well, you get favor by association. We treat rich people differently. We make time for them.

We can clear our schedule for them. We give them attention. We laugh at their jokes, because we want to benefit in some way.

And the reason that that kind of behavior is worldly is because it's actually a form of self-love.

There's lots of talk in our culture today about the rich using people.

That may be true. But plenty of people use the rich as well in order to get what they want. The point is that James says that there isn't to be any of this in the church.

But it's really important, I think, that we see that James isn't referring here simply to financial wealth. Remember that these believers, to whom he writes, have come to faith in Christ from Judaism, and they have been scattered because they've been persecuted for naming the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and not bowing the knee to the Jewish system.

[3 : 48] So, when James gives this mini parable in verses 2 and 4, he has 2 to 4. He has a particular kind of rich person in mind. So, do you see, it's interesting the details that are mentioned.

This person who comes into their gathering is wearing a signet ring, and he has fine clothing, verse 2. Those point to his authority. And we're told in verses 6 and 7 that this rich person is actually an oppressor and a blasphemer.

I think what we're supposed to see is that this isn't just a generic wealthy person. This man is some kind of leader from the Jewish establishment who has come to see them. So, what's happening is this beleaguered group thinks, well, if we can treat this guy well, with all of his authority, all of his influence, he might use that influence in order to help us.

It's a bit like today, us trying to get favor from the local MP or even the prime minister. They come along on Sunday, and we make a fuss of them because, well, they might be able to help us. They might be able to assist us in our mission. So, you're unwelcome. Down at the door there, and two men arrive at the same time. One of them pulls up in a Range Rover with blacked-out windows, and you think he looks familiar, very well-dressed.

[5 : 10] You might have seen him on television. Hello, sir. Lovely to meet you. You're very, very welcome. Let me get you a seat. Come with me. Come this way. The other guy arrives.

He looks a bit shabby. Morning. Very welcome. Wait there for a moment. Sorry. Just, if you don't actually, just grab a seat wherever. I think there's one over there somewhere.

In fact, you know, maybe you just want to perch on the floor. That's all right. It can be a subtle kind of thing, but it's usually pretty obvious. The person with wealth and authority and power gets special treatment.

It's the same self-love that marks the culture on display in the church. And James says it's worldly and it's ugly. Just like anger, actually, it doesn't bring about the righteousness of God.

He's saying political manipulation, working the rich does not accomplish God's work. Indeed, when you do that, look at verse 4. He's saying, you make distinctions among yourselves and you become judges with evil thoughts.

[6 : 17] Literally, you divide yourselves. That problem sound familiar? We heard that right at the start of the letter in chapter 1, verse 8. Double-mindedness. Divided.

One foot in the kingdom of God, one foot in the world. One foot in the kingdom of service one foot in the kingdom of equality. One foot in the kingdom of out for what I can get.

Let's work the angles and see if we can get ahead. And James says, don't do it. And he goes on to provide two reasons why we're not to do it.

Point number one, he says it's against God's design. To show partiality within the church is against God's design.

Verse 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?

[7 : 14] But you have dishonored the poor man. A couple of weeks ago, we heard James tell the poor man to rejoice in his exaltation for this reason.

In the economy of God, it is the poor whom he chooses. He goes to those that the world overlooks. He meets them in their need and he chooses them to be in his family.

Now, James isn't saying, he's definitely not saying, as some theologians seem to want to say, that material poverty is a requirement for salvation. He can't be saying that. God doesn't choose the poor because they are poor.

He's saying that what is required is humility, poverty of spirit. Remember, I said at the outset that this letter echo after echo after echo of the Sermon on the Mount.

Who is blessed? Who finds favor with God? Who flourishes in God's eyes? The poor in spirit. And anyone who possesses that kind of poverty can be saved.

[8 : 18] Indeed, they will be saved. In practice, what that means, however, is that those who have very little materially are actually at a spiritual advantage.

How is that the case? Well, if you have nothing else to hope in, you're very aware of your need and you're open to what Christ has to offer. That's why Luke, when he uses his beatitudes, he says in Luke chapter 6, verse 20, blessed are the poor.

If you have plenty of other things to trust in, money, contact, influence, then you look to those things to deliver the life that you want and what ends up happening is that you resist what God is doing in your life to grow you to maturity.

When trials come, how many of us, the first thing we think is we can pay our way out of this, we can ring somebody who will help us to get our way out of this. If only I had that level of influence, if only I was that kind of person, well then I could fix this situation.

That's the problem. If you have those things, you tend to trust in them. That is why Jesus says in the following verses in Luke chapter 6, he starts, blessed are the poor, he goes through his beatitudes, and then he says, 624, woe to you who are rich for you have already received your comfort.

[9 : 39] If we have resources, we can fix things. Without those resources, when things come our way from God under His hand to cause us to have to lean on Him and have to grow, what ends up

happening?

We lean on Him and we grow and we're spiritually much healthier. Woe to you who are rich for you have already received your comfort. Hey, by the way, this is why God sends trials of various kinds to those who are truly His, trials that money and contacts and influence can't do anything to fix. God is intent on maturing us, on growing us up, whatever we have materially, whatever we have in terms of contacts and influence. And sometimes He will send things our way that whatever we have can't fix, like sickness, like problems with our children, like relational breakdown.

Your money doesn't work. Your contacts are no help. Your influence delivers nothing. What's happening? God is forcing you back on Him so that you gain steadfastness, chapter 1, verse 3, so that you grow to maturity.

Look, if wealth or comfort or privilege in this life causes you to miss out on Christ or to fail to grow up in the ways of Christ, whatever you have, it isn't worth the pleasure or confidence that it has provided.

[11:18] Whatever it was that you trusted in rather than Him, it wasn't worth it. So, to dishonor the poor is to push against God's design. He chooses the poor and the world to be rich in faith.

And they are co-heirs with everyone else in God's kingdom. The ground at the foot of the cross of Christ is level. However we've got to the point of poverty of spirit, that doesn't matter.

That is God's work. The ground at the foot of the cross is level. Just to say, many of us are rich, at least by global standards.

But it may be that you feel relatively poor. You're not as rich as someone else. Well, if that's the case, let me say, look at verse 5. Let verse 5 get into your bones.

Listen, my beloved brothers, has God not chosen, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom? Our world might despise poverty and weakness.

[12:23] God does not. Our culture might choose the strong and the impressive, but God doesn't. Your poverty is no barrier to knowing Christ, nor is it a barrier to receiving a heavenly inheritance that is worth more than any earthly inheritance.

Even the biggest, the Gates children, the Musk children, the Bezos children, poor kids. They're all looking forward to a massive inheritance. It is nothing compared to this one. In Christ, you inherit God's kingdom.

Don't show partiality because it is against God's design. James continues, it is also secondly against God's law. Verses 8 to 11, 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. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, do not commit adultery, also said, do not murder.

[13:36] If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. Now, James hasn't gone here on a theological tangent to talk about the law. Verse 9, partiality is still his concern.

But he ties it here to God's law because it is such a prominent theme in the Old Testament. Exodus 23, Deuteronomy 1, Deuteronomy 10, Israel are commanded to act without partiality, to be impartial.

And they're to do that because to do that is to mirror or to imitate God. And when we get further on, when we get to Jesus' summary of the law, impartiality lies behind what He says.

You remember? The Old Testament law is summed up in two commands. Love God and love your neighbor. And it follows. It un... Whatever. There's no disconnection.

It has to follow that you simply cannot love your neighbor if you discriminate against them. Just sit on the floor there. I'm going to talk to the rich guy. Partiality is a failure of neighbor love.

[14:41] It is very simple, but it is so important. James speaks to those because of its importance. He can't emphasize this enough. In fact, he says, listen, to those of you that want to wriggle out of this, I've got something to say.

They say, okay, well, maybe do fall down on the partiality front. Maybe not great at that, but I'm good at the others. I'm pretty good at the others, most of them anyway.

I'll take the test. I'm sure I'll do a solid seven out of ten on the Ten Commandments. He says, no. The law comes as a whole. You can't break it in one place and not destroy the whole thing.

It's a bit like bursting a football. You can't burst a football and put a hole in one place and not ruin the whole thing. If you tried to say, but no, it's not ruined. There's only a tiny hole there. The hole's only in that part. It's nonsense. One place it breaks, the whole thing is useless. And if you start going, oh, no, there's only a tiny hole there, you miss the point. God's law requires us to love our poor neighbor.

[15:47] It's saying here, if you only have time for the rich, you're in sin. So, partiality is against God's design. It's against God's law. This is James' kind of one-two as to why favoritism has no place in the church.

But I said at the beginning, it kind of comes naturally to us. We might know that favoritism is an ugly trait, but it just kind of happens. We gravitate towards rich and influential and powerful people if we can gain their favor.

So, how do we change? How do we change? Well, I want to suggest that we focus ourselves. We lift our eyes. We focus our gaze. We turn our hearts to three realities that James mentions in the passage here, but he mentions them almost in passing.

So, the first one is the fatherhood of God. Look at verse 27. Chapter 1, verse 27. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, to keep oneself unstained from the world.

He doesn't say that. He doesn't say God. He says God the Father. The sort of religion that God the Father loves reflects God the Father's posture towards the world.

[17:07] He loves as a perfect father. It's terrible. It's a terrible home where fathers have favorite children.

You see it in families where one child is particularly talented. They get all the time and attention. Why is that? In the hope that the child can make it in some way. Whatever area their talent lies, it's often couched in terms of, I just want to give them the best opportunities they can.

But actually, it's usually much more about the parents because if your child becomes rich and famous, there's a good chance you will as well. Favoritism among children, favoritism among your children is really destructive.

One of my children describes themselves as favorite child. They come to my office after school and they say, Hi, Dad, favorite child here and continue.

Sometimes they even sign off their emails, Yours, favorite child. Now, their siblings find this annoying. So, we've had a few dinner table summits where I make it clear to them who my favorite really is.

[18:23] Obviously, I go around and tell them things that I value about all of them. They say, No, that's boring. Who's your favorite? I say, Well, of course, your mother's my favorite. Good fathers don't discriminate.

And we don't love our children for what we can get from them. And we don't discriminate because that is an imitation of how God loves His children.

As we've said, He loves those who have nothing to give in return. God loves those who know that their hands are empty.

And to those who know that, He showers us with the love of a perfect Father. Whatever your experience of earthly fathers, and I know for some of us that's not great, say the least, but whether your experience is good or bad, when you come to God, you are received by a Father who loves you indiscriminately.

In our sin, we're all the shabby guy. We're all the guy with nothing to offer. Spiritually speaking, you can have all the zeros in the world at the end of your bank account.

[19:47] Spiritually speaking, we're all the shabby guy. When it comes to God, that currency doesn't work. And yet, in our shabbiness, God doesn't wait for us to get cleaned up in order to accept us.

You know that, don't you? God isn't waiting for you to clean up your life, to show yourself to be impressive, to be able to perform at a level that He can go, well, okay, I'll accept you.

No. He doesn't wait for you to sort yourself out. He comes to you at your worst, and He says, my son shed His blood for you.

Come and welcome. God doesn't overlook you. He loves you, and He welcomes you in the Lord Jesus.

And here's the thing. It is to the degree that you know that love yourself, that you know it in your heart, not just up here, not just that you can answer the question, does God love me? Yes, God loves me because I put my faith in the Lord Jesus.

[20 : 56] It's that when you experience that in the depths of who you are, that you know that you've been welcomed into God's family, that you know that you are secure in His love despite your spiritual poverty.

It is to the degree that you know that yourself that you won't look down on others. First reality we need to grasp is the fatherhood of God. The second is in verse 1, it is the glory of Christ.

Again, James includes a detail almost in passing that is absolutely massively important. My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

He could have gone on from there, but he adds, the Lord of glory. Why does he do that? Well, I think it's to remind us that there is only one truly glorious person.

There is only one man who has walked the path of trials to maturity and to glory. Hebrews 5, verses 8 and 9, although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered and being made perfect, mature.

[22 : 04] He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. That's the pattern. And it is this pattern holding to the faithfulness of Jesus that James exhorts us to imitate.

We could summarize the letter to this point, I think, this way. Rejoice in your trials as Jesus rejoiced. Remain steadfast, persevere as he persevered, and be made mature as he was made mature.

Part of our love of the rich is their glory, their power and their authority and their status, and that's what we're drawn to and that's what we want to share of.

So, if we can just make them like us, we can just get rich adjacent. That would be the way it would be described, isn't it? If we can just get alongside them, we'll get caught up in that glory ourselves. We'll get to share some of that glory. Remember, having lunch with a wealthy friend a number of years ago and it was quite an experience. The people that waited on the table and the people that were also at the table, they treated me very differently because I was with the big guy.

[23 : 14] I was sharing in that glory. The problem is, it is when we desire that, when we pursue that and we want their favor in order to get it, it does terrible things to us.

I don't mean even just the sinister things that people do for the praise of the rich. I mean, laughing at jokes that aren't funny. Yes, of course.

Flattery. Denying your values in order just to keep them on side. Keeping your mouth shut when the big guy states his opinions about things that you think are nonsense. Why are we drawn to this?

In the world, it's because of the glory hunger that exists in the human soul. We, all of us, are created for glory and there is this, as it were, this gap in the soul, this emptiness, this lack of glory and we're hungry for it.

But what we do is we decide that the glory of the rich in this life is enough for us and we settle for so little when we do that. Because whatever glory that is, it's always fleeting, it's always dissatisfying, the pleasures always come and they go.

[24 : 32] And when Christians do this, when we seek the approval of the influential and the rich, what we're doing, we do that because we've diminished or we've forgotten the glory of Christ.

You know, if we really grasp, again, in the deep places of our heart, if we really grasp that there is only one truly glorious person, He is absolute beauty, absolute truth, absolute goodness, absolute perfection.

And if we really know that through the gospel we aren't merely associated with Him, we aren't merely glory adjacent in some detached way. And if we grasp that we don't merely follow His example in our own strength, but we're united to Him and we possess His Holy Spirit, that changes just about everything.

It changes how you think about the very Christian life itself. What is the point of your Christian faith? What is the point of it? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

You are Christian because God saved you not to live your best life now, but to make you like Christ, the glorious one, and to bring you into a share of His glory.

[25 : 49] And He sends trials along the way to ensure that we get there, to make us like Christ, and in order to get us to a share of that glory. The glory path that we walk is a path that inevitably requires us to go through the same trials that Jesus endured.

If you want to be like Jesus, if you want to share eternity with Jesus, you have to walk the path that He walked. When we see the glory of Christ, that He is the glorious one, it changes the very Christian life itself, how we view it.

It especially then changes also how you view other people in the church. When you are in Christ, the glorious one, you don't need earthly glory. Do you know that?

When you have Christ, you have everything that you need. You don't need earthly glory, and you see that your poorer brothers and sisters share in that glory in the same way that you do, and you're equal.

Can you see that Jesus Christ is the Lord of glory? And can you see that all the glory that you're searching for in other things is found in Him?

[27 : 09] Unless we are captivated by Christ's glory, we will be taken up by lesser glories. We'll be sucked in and seduced by lesser glories. I'll be dazzled by wealth and power and anything else that I might be able to get in on.

Unless I am dazzled by Christ's glory, I'll be unimpressed with you if you can't meet my glory needs. If you're not going to be able to satisfy the glory hunger within me, well, you're no use to me.

And so, partiality will inevitably follow. Lift your gaze from the petty glories of this life and set your mind and heart on the glory of Christ. Fatherhood of God, the glory of Christ.

And then, thirdly, James is more explicit about this, the judgment to come. The judgment to come. While we might make these judgments about people now, that person's impressive, that person's important, not so much.

Don't forget that we will all one day be judged ourselves. Look at verse 12. 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.

[28 : 22] mercy triumphs over judgment. The law of liberty that we have set aside in our judging between people won't be set aside on the last day when it is God's turn to judge us.

When it's not you standing at the door of the church making your judgment, oh, impressive, come and sit here, lovely, let me get you a cup of tea, but it's God standing at the door of heaven as you approach.

As you approach holding the two tablets of the law cracked apart because you refuse to love your neighbor as yourself. That's all of us.

That's all of us. What are we hoping for at that moment? What do we need at that moment? What we need is mercy.

And we will plead, Lord, have mercy on me. And you know how God will reply? You want mercy?

[29 : 22] How much mercy did you show to the people who needed it from you? The poor man, the homeless, the person who could do nothing for you. Did you give them time and care?

James reminds us that a day is coming and if we don't show mercy to those around us now, don't expect to get it then from God. God, it is a very solemn warning.

It's not just that you're shortchanging yourself then if you choose to pursue the favor of the rich and the powerful for what they can give you in this life, but you're doing a terrible deal with eternity.

But, it's not the last word, is it? Look at verse 13.

It is incredibly convicting, but it's not the last word. James also reminds us that in Christ, mercy triumphs over judgment. Because God is merciful, we should be merciful.

[30 : 29] Yes, we should, but we hear the challenge. But when we sense the fact that we have failed there, we don't despair because the one who demands mercy has also shown mercy. Here's the thing to go away with this morning.

For disciples of the Lord Jesus, God's mercy is always the last word. Mercy triumphs over judgment. The pursuit of wealth and power do not accomplish the work of God.

The pursuit of wealth and power do not accomplish the work of God, either in our lives, in the church, or in the culture. But a deep knowledge of the fatherhood of God, the glory of Christ, and the judgment to come will change us.

It will. It will change us. It will change our relationship to earthly glory, and it will change how we view others in the church. So, may God help us. Let's pray together.

Let's pray together.