

James 2 (Part 1) :1-13 • God's solution to racism and bigotry

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We're in the book of James here on Sunday morning, and we are starting chapter 2. So open your Bible, please, to James chapter 2. I'm going to read through the first 13 verses of the chapter. Follow along with me as I do.

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

Stop there, let's pray. Father, open our hearts. This is where we turn to You, Lord, especially when passages become challenging. But certainly in every case, Lord, we present our hearts before You that we might learn and grow, But there are some challenging things that James talks about here, and we need Your help. And we pray that You would open our hearts, to hear Your voice today, and we ask it in the name of our Savior, Christ the Lord, amen. Amen.

It's kind of interesting, you know, as you read through this passage, you're reminded instantly that the problems that we have with us, today, have been

around for a long time. I think sometimes we like to think these are all kind of new, but even in the first century, you know, these were things that the church was dealing with. And what we see, here, is James addressing the issue of what we would probably refer to as social injustice. Resulting in discrimination and partiality depending on a person's social status or several other kinds of status.

We don't use the word "partiality" much today, at least I don't. I don't know about you. We have other words that are a little hard-hitting, and we like to hit hard. We use racism, bigotry, prejudice, things like that. Unfortunately, all of those are still very much alive and well in our world, today. Although it seems to me, little bit of editorializing, here, I suppose, But the word "racism" seems to have kind of taken on a new meaning. It now kind of means anything that you believe that doesn't match up to mine.

And that seems to be a very common theme, you know, in our culture. If I say something and you don't agree with me, I'm going to call you a racist. Which is really interesting because it really has no connection to the real idea, the true idea of racism, which is the belief that there are certain social or cultural groups that are better or superior.

Isn't that interesting that we have that in us? It's just in us and we can't deny it. It is in us, that we like to feel special, and so sometimes we even create whole rules and ideologies and belief systems, predicated on the idea that I'm better. Not only am I better, I'm better than you. "My dad can beat up your dad." I mean, it's really that same kind of childish attitude really, to be honest with you. And that's what real racism is kind of all about.

You know, we just recently observed that day that our nation has set apart annually to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and that's the kind of racism that he was fighting against, and that people are still, in many sectors, fighting against. And I'll tell you right now, while I have a very deep appreciation for what Dr. King was working very hard to try to bring about, you need to understand that there is a huge difference between his goals and what James is talking about here, in this particular passage.

Because essentially Dr. King was attempting to change the laws of the land and to change the thinking of people everywhere, which was a very laudable goal, and it's still probably a worthy goal. But that's not what James is trying to do here. That's not what he's aiming for as he writes this letter. In fact, he's coming at this issue from a completely different angle, and you can see that angle when you look at verse 1.

Look with me again in your Bible, in verse 1, it says: “*My brothers, (And that ought to start right there) show no partiality (and then, this is an important statement here too:) as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*” Probably, the most important thing to start off understanding, here, from verse 1, is to whom this exhortation is addressed. It's not written to politicians. He wasn't writing a letter to his governor, or to the Senate, or whoever might make the laws of the land. He is writing this letter not even to the general public. He starts off “*My brothers...*” And that is a word that is used, biblically, to describe believers in Jesus Christ, all right? Make no mistake about it. And this means that James' goal was not to address cultural or societal problems, that wasn't what he was doing, even though they were very serious in his day. I mean, we tend to think it's really bad in our day, and it is, it's bad, But in the first century, wow!

That time period was filled with the same sort of stuff. The kind of prejudice and hatred that is based on social standing, cultural background, religious convictions. A lot of that was going on in James' day. Just as much, if not more than today. But that's not what he was addressing. That's not what he was trying to change. He was writing to remind believers, and that's you and me, along with the people he wrote to, to remind us that those things have no place in the body of Christ, okay? That was where James started and stopped. It's not that he didn't want, perhaps, these things to spill over into the culture, but that wasn't his expectation. His goal was to write to the body of Christ, to write to the church.

And there are two very key reasons why we should never see partiality in the body of Christ. And the very first one is that to be impartial, is to be like God. Because God, we're told, well, let me show you. Three passages I'm going to show you. First:

Romans 2:11 (ESV)

...God shows no partiality.

Ephesians 6:9, Paul writes,

Ephesians 6:9 (ESV)

Masters... stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

And then in Colossians 3:25 Paul says,

Colossians 3:25 (ESV)

For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

So we can see that this is the heart of God. And because it's the heart of God, it ought to be the heart of believers. We should bring no partiality and that means no prejudice, bigotry, racism, or hatred for others of any other social class or standing into the church. It shouldn't exist here. And we could probably just leave these three passages as plenty of testimony and proof as to why those things should never be in the church.

But there's another very, very, very, very important reason why bigotry, and partiality, and prejudice, should never exist within the church; and that is because they've all been abolished at the cross of Christ. Let me show you, Galatians. I love this:

Galatians 3:27-29 (ESV)

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (And then, he begins to describe what it means to put on Christ) There is neither Jew nor Greek, (that could be Jew or Gentile) there is neither slave nor free, (and that to you and me, in our culture, would probably mean wealthy or poor) there is no (not even) male and female, (in Christ. Those distinctions are gone. You know, that in James' day the male and female distinction was a very big one too. I mean, you know, a woman's testimony wasn't admissible in court. "And yet in Christ," James says, "those things are gone." And he goes on to end,) for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, (and) heirs according to promise. (And that means that all people, from all classes, all distinctions, all areas of life, all socioeconomic backgrounds, religious persuasions, don't matter. Once they come to Christ, once they embrace the cross of Christ, those distinctions are gone, they go away. They literally are gone, even male and female.)

That's amazing! So I got to tell you that one of the things I've always loved about the Gospel. I've referred to it over the years as "the great equalizer" because, you know, in Christ and at the cross, we stand shoulder to shoulder.

Nobody stands over another person, nobody stands above another individual. And I like that. And the reason, again, that it is the great equalizer, is because in the Gospel we come to terms with the fact that we are all sinners saved by grace. Not one of us deserves to be saved, and every one of us is under the same sentence of death. Look what Paul wrote in Romans 3. He says:

Romans 3:22b-24 (ESV)

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

For there is no distinction: (right?) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (I don't care how much money you make, I don't care what your family lineage is, you have fallen short of the glory of God. But you know what? When you come to Jesus, we're all justified by His grace as a gift, that's what he goes on to say. He says, not only are we all lost, we're all saved the same way) and are justified by his grace (of God) as a (free) gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

So isn't that something? This is a good reminder for us, you know. When we're living in a culture that is rife with racism, and bigotry, and hatred, it's important for us to remember that it doesn't matter in the church, it doesn't matter what your income level is, or your skin color is, or your popularity, or your education level, or your ethnic background. Those things don't matter. As I said, no one in the body of Christ stands taller than anyone else, we are one in Jesus Christ. If we don't get it, we don't understand the Gospel. Bottom line.

Now, in verses 2 and 3, you'll notice as we read through, there, James kind of gives us an example of two men walking into the same church. One of them is wealthy, one of them is poor, and he tells us in verse 4 that if we make a distinction between those two men, we've actually done something that is evil. Did you notice, he said in verse 4 that we've “*become judges with evil thoughts?*” That's kind of a strong phrase, isn't it?

But you have to ask yourself, why is it evil to make a distinction? It's actually evil. Racism is evil. Social class distinctions are evil for the body of Christ. Why? Well, because when we show partiality... you know, some guy walks in with a nice coat and he's well-dressed and all the other things, and somebody else comes in and is in rags, and if we make a distinction, and we treat one of those individuals differently, it is an evil sort of a thing because, we are showing

by that, that their outward appearance is what gets our attention, and that's what sways our view of what they're worth.

And that's evil according to the Word of God. It is the opposite, in fact, of what the Lord sees when the Lord looks at people. You think He cares a snit about your clothes, your income level, or your skin color? You think He cares anything about those things? I'll show you something from 1 Samuel chapter 16.

1 Samuel 16:7 (ESV)

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not (emphasis on the word "not") look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

That is such a powerful passage, and by the way, that was spoken to Samuel as a rebuke when he was looking upon the handsomeness and the stature of one of David's older brothers, and Samuel thought to himself "Oh, surely this is the one the Lord chose to be king over all of Israel." And God said: "No, actually not. No, not that one. I don't look at people the way you look at people, you look at the outside, I look at the heart." And by the way, that statement where the Lord tells us that He looks at the heart, that is a key to understanding so much of Scripture.

You might be shocked to find out how many times... people write to me all the time or ask me questions about, "Is this a sin? Is this a sin? Is this a sin?" And many times what they're talking about are things that in and of themselves are not sinful. And I have to write them back and I have to refine them. "God doesn't so much care about these external things. He cares more about your heart. What's going on in here?" (Points to his heart) See, two people can do the same action, and for one it can be a sin, and for one it cannot. It may not be a sin based on the heart. In other words, the desire. Based on the desire. It is the evil desires of man that make things sinful, not just your actions.

Oh, but we forget that all the time because we're so used to just looking at external things. Like the outside of a person and so forth. So James goes on here in verse 5 to say: "*Listen, my beloved brothers, (and again, he reminds us he is writing to the saints, he's writing to the church, he's writing to believers.) 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? And what James is saying is: “I want you to start looking at people the way God looks at people. These people are precious to Him, precious, and they are joint heirs with Christ.”

You know, you guys know that Sue and I have been here, now, for 31 years. But we moved here, from Seattle or the Seattle metropolitan area. We were just a stone's throw actually above the northern border of Seattle. But I liked living in Seattle, and it was kind of a pride thing, I'll admit to you, now. I liked living there. And I had told the Lord on several occasions that that was where I wanted to stay. And yet, the Lord, through His grace and wisdom, ultimately brought us to Ontario, Oregon. But I have to tell you, that I spent about the first six months here, in Ontario, wondering “What in the world I'm doing here?”

And I particularly remember a time on one morning, before the rest of the family was awake, and we'd been here about six months or so maybe, and I got up before the rest of the family got up, and I wrapped myself in a blanket. And I went out and sat in our front living room, looked out the window, and where our house was situated at that point when I'd look out the window I'd see the Idaho horizon, and yet, here we are in Oregon, and I'm looking around this area and I actually said out loud to the Lord: “What am I doing here?”

And it was one of those rare times that the Lord spoke to me very clearly, gently, but in very much a rebuke. And He said, “I love these people. I love these people. And I loved them just as much as My saints anywhere else.” And that was very humbling because I was kind of getting all up in myself thinking, I should be in Seattle, you know. The big metropolitan area is where I can make an impact. What a dork. It's in our heart, isn't it? It's in our heart. Racism, bigotry, prejudice. It's hardwired. It's in me. It's in you too. That's why I'm not afraid to admit it's in me.

So you know, he goes on verse 6 to say: “*But you have dishonored the poor man*” when you forget the fact that he is a joint heir. And that's the point of what he's saying there in verses 5 and 6. He's reminding us that those who are poor in earthly terms are actually wealthy because they've been made rich by their relationship with Jesus as joint heirs with Him, and so forth.

And he says, “to ignore that”... when I look at somebody who is poor in this life, and I look at him like he is something less... do you see what I'm doing? I'm judging by the standard of this world, rather than the standards of heaven. And do you see what an evil thing that is? When we become judges based on earthly standards, and what we're doing is we're ignoring, we're ignoring the

Word of God, the reality of heavenly truths in favor of earthly truths, you see. And Christians do that quite often, I might remind you. And yet, it's a mistake that we make.

And so he goes on here in the middle of verse 6 and following to kind of remind them, he says, *aren't the rich people the ones who are actually oppressing you, and dragging you into court? And sometimes, they even ⁷... blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?*” Now please understand here James is not trying to just lasso all wealthy people and say, “Well, they're nothing but a bunch of good for nothings” or anything, you know.

We need to remember that there were many people in the Bible who were very godly people who were given great wealth. Abraham was filthy rich, you know. Job was a very wealthy man. And you could go on, and on, and on, and talk about many godly people who were given worldly wealth. What James is doing here, at the latter part of verse 6, and into verse 7, is making the point that the poor people aren't the ones who are causing you problems. That's what he's saying. They're not the ones who are dragging you into court, they're not the ones who are making complaints before magistrates, and so forth.

And you know, I hate to say it, but the simple fact is wealthy people tend to kind of feel entitled, you know? They tend to kind of feel entitled to certain treatment. And if they don't get treated the way they think they deserve, then they tend to make a stink about it. And that's what James is just reminding the people about.

And so he says in verse 8, look with me in your Bible 8 and 9, he says: “*If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, (and then, he reveals what the royal law is,) “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” (He says:) you are doing well. ⁹But if you show partiality, (in other words, you allow racism, bigotry, and that sort of stuff to enter in,) you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*”

Jesus affirmed what James here calls the royal law as equal to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, right? Jesus said, “And no less, no less important, love your neighbor as yourself.” So you know, Jesus affirmed that. And anything James says, less than obedience to that law, proves that we are transgressors. You guys remember what “transgressor” means? The word “transgressor” is defined as someone who knows what is right and what is wrong and with full knowledge they just barrel through and violate that law anyway. That is a transgressor. And so he goes on to make an important

comment about being a lawbreaker, and this is important, and it kind of moves even beyond James's argument to other things.

But in verse 10, this is an important verse. He says: *“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in (at) one point has become guilty of all of it.”* Now, you may even have that passage or that verse underlined in your Bible, But I got to tell you, it is somewhat misunderstood. I need to tell you what that verse is saying, and I need to tell you what it is not saying.

First of all, what he's saying is that when we talk about breaking God's laws, we tend to look at it as if we're knocking down bowling pins. In fact, we'll take the 10 commandments and we'll put all 10 of those, wrap them on a bowling pin. We tend to think of breaking God's law, like something like: “Well, yeah, I knocked down a couple of those pins, but at least eight of them are still standing.” Actually, that's not the way it works. That's not the way it works at all. That's a wrong way to look at it. Breaking God's law is more like looking at a windowpane that you put a crack in. And it really doesn't matter where that crack is because at whatever point that you crack that glass, it means the whole pane is broken.

And that's really the way James wants us to see, or to understand or to look at the law. When you've broken... when you've broken the law, you're a law breaker. You've broken the law. It's like the whole thing has been broken, even though you haven't committed some of these other things, right?

But let me tell you what this verse is not saying, and this is where I think there's some misunderstanding among Christians. I hear people saying from time to time: “Well, you know, sin is sin and sin is sin. All sins are the same.” And that's actually not true, and that's not what James is saying. He's not telling you that all sins are equal. Stealing a candy bar is not the same as committing adultery, and committing adultery is not the same thing as committing murder. All sins will make you a transgressor of the law, but that doesn't mean all sins are the same. So we have to be careful in our understanding of that.

When somebody says that to you: “Well, it doesn't matter what you do. All sin is the same.” I kind of know what they're saying, what they mean is; any sin will make you a lawbreaker. But they're saying it wrong, and that's a confusing thing to say, and it's not true. All sin is not the same, but all sin does make you a lawbreaker. That is true.

Now, in verse 12, this is where James exhorts us, having understood the things that he's saying. And he says: *“So (now, again, he's talking to believers, so)*

...speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of (freedom) liberty.” And this verse may not be immediately clear, because this term “law of...” ...well, I actually read it the way I wanted to read it. You might have noticed it actually says, *“the law of liberty.”* And I said “the law of freedom” because that's what it means (whisper voice). And this is one of those verses where the NIV did a better job than the ESV. They actually speak about *“the law that gives freedom.”*

That's what James is talking about here. You got to remember he's writing to Jews, and who understood the Mosaic law, and they knew that the law of Moses was essentially a law of condemnation. The law of Moses, all it did was it told you how much of a dirty, rotten person you were. I mean, it kind of, that was it. It basically measured for you just how bad you were, but it actually offered no help to get you to change, okay? The law of Moses gave you no help, it just said...again, we've mentioned it many times, it was like your bathroom scale. It tells you how much you need to lose, but it doesn't pick up a finger to help you do that.

So that's kind of the way the law is. James refers to the law that we are under, as *“the law of liberty”* or *“the law that gives freedom”* because now, in Christ, we have entered into a new relationship to the law, through our relationship of Jesus Christ, and he calls it *“the law of freedom or liberty”* because, in Christ, we have now been set free from the controlling power of sin.

Now, I don't have time to get into this, and into the kind of depth it needs to. This is, frankly, if you really want to know more about how you've been set free from the controlling power of sin, go back to the book of Romans, and particularly Romans chapter 6. It's a powerful, powerful, powerful chapter concerning how we've been set free, how the Gospel, the cross, has set us free from the dominion and the tyranny of the sinful nature to dictate our lives and to say: “You must. You will sin.” And we had no choice before we were in Christ. But now, you see, we're under the law of freedom. And what that means is; you now have the freedom to choose who you're going to obey.

A lot of Christians come to Christ, and I think that when you get saved, it means that now you're going to obey Jesus all the time, and it doesn't. It means now, you're free to obey Him if you choose to. You didn't have that freedom before, now you do. Before, you were a slave to sin, and now that slavery has been broken through Jesus Christ. And you can now choose to follow Him. You can choose to say, “No, no, I'm not going to go that way, I'm going to go this way. I'm going to follow Jesus.” You can choose that. You can also choose to go

back this way (the opposite way) if you want to. You don't have to. The power of sin has been broken to make you go that way, but you can still choose to.

Every Christian who's walked with the Lord for any period of time knows that. When they finally come to terms with the fact that, "Gee, you know what? I came to Jesus and I'm still sinning. What's this all about?" Yeah, coming to Jesus doesn't mean you're going to stop sinning, it means you have the freedom now to choose to stop and to go the other way.

That's the "*law of freedom*," "*the law of liberty*." So James is basically saying, "Now, I want you to live, I want you to speak, I want you to act like you've been given that freedom to obey God." That freedom that is still a choice.

And then he ends the section by saying: "¹³*For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*" What he's doing here, in this last statement that we're looking at this morning, is giving kind of a summary of everything that he's been looking at in this chapter thus far.

I want you to remember something; James is writing to believers. What does that mean? That means these people are already saved, okay? He's not writing to unbelievers. This is not an evangelistic message. This is a message to the church. And the message is concerning mercy, that our penalty, God's mercy was shown in that our penalty was taken care of at the cross, okay? Our penalty was paid, all right?

So when he talks about mercy, here, he is not talking about the mercy that eventuates in eternal salvation. Remember, he is already talking to people who are saved. James is basically saying that what we show to others in the way of mercy, even as believers, what we show to others, we're actually showing to God. And what we do, we're going to get in return in this life. In other words, we're going to reap what we have sown, okay?

But again, he's not talking about salvation here. He's not telling people, you know, "If you show mercy, then you'll get mercy at the judgment seat." No. See if he were saying that, then salvation would be based on what we earn. It's not based on what we earn, by being merciful to others.

He's talking about sowing and reaping as a believer, as a born-again Christian. And this is essentially what Jesus told us at the Sermon on the Mount. Let me show you this from Matthew chapter 7, first couple of verses. Jesus said:

Matthew 7:1-2 (ESV)

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”

I wanted to remind you, again, that's not a recipe for salvation. That's not what Jesus was doing. He was giving you a biblical principle. A biblical principle is important to understand. It means it's kind of a spiritual law. What you sow you reap. And you need to understand that, if you go around being judgmental, you're going to receive judgment from others.

And you see, that's the point of what James is saying here in this passage, because he's addressing people who are judging others based on their clothing, or their income level, or their skin color, or their ethnic background, or their education level, and all those other things. Don't do that. He says that kind of judgment has no place in the body of Christ.

It's going to happen, and you're going to have thoughts along those lines, but you have to say, “No. No, I will not because God does not look at the person that way. And I choose not to look at the person that way as well. I'm going to honor the spiritual truth, that this individual is in Christ and, therefore, he or she is my brother or sister in Jesus, and a joint heir with me, and I stand no higher or lower than anyone else in the body of Christ.”

So worldly distinctions. The world obsesses over them. And I got to tell you, they come up with some really stupid ways of battling what they consider to be excesses or racism. Like critical race theory. Good grief! Critical race theory enhances racism. You know, the world's looking for answers, but the answers are found in Jesus.

You want to get rid of racism? Yeah, it's going to happen one day. It will. But not while we have our presidents, and prime ministers, and kings in power. It's going to be when the King of Kings takes the throne. That's when racism is going to be done away with, and bigotry, and prejudice because, you see, at the foot of the cross, we're all the same, we're all the same. And I am saved just like you're saved. I deserve the hottest spot in hell, but I get the glory of heaven just like you. Isn't that beautiful? I mean, when you stop and think about it, it's amazing, and we need to think about it. We need to ponder it more often. Let's stand together.

If you need prayer this morning, I hope you'll be bold enough to come up and pray with our prayer team up front here if there's just something weighing on your heart.

Dear Father, You have made us one in Jesus Christ. There is no distinction. There's no place for worldly ideas or understandings of what it means to be superior or inferior, or better or worse, we are just simply children of God. And we all came in the same way, and we all receive the same grace. And I thank you, Father. I thank You that the Gospel is the great equalizer. And I pray, my Father God, that by understanding this message as we do, we would show the world how this racism things gets taken care of. That we would show the world there's a different way, and that way is through Jesus Christ. For it is in His name that we pray, and all God's people said together, amen.

God bless you. Have a good rest of your Sunday.