

MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT

James 2:1-13

Key Verse: 2:13

“...because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

In his letter, James deals with some specific topics that are rather unique in the Bible such as taming the tongue, and praying with a right motive. Showing favoritism is also one of these issues. Many other Bible books mention favoritism but do not explain in detail what it means. However, James uniquely develops a teaching on favoritism. What is favoritism? Why must believers not show favoritism? How can we overcome this human tendency? Showing favoritism is related to passing judgment. The key verse says, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” Let’s learn what this means to us.

First, believers must not show favoritism (1-4). In 1:27 James had explained that the true religion that God desires is to care for the widow and the orphan, who were marginalized in their society. But it was not easy to do this because their social structure favored the strong and powerful, while despising the weak and vulnerable. Far from being considered sin, favoritism was normal for their society and had seeped into the church. James spoke strongly against this as a root problem that needed to be corrected. He fought against the evil social structure of his time and earned the title, “James the Just.”

James said in verse 1, “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.” This verse tells us that having faith in Jesus and showing favoritism are incompatible. Favoritism literally means “to accept face.” It is to make distinctions between people based on external considerations, such as appearance, race, or socioeconomic status. More important matters, such as a person’s character, the quality of their faith, or their morality and value system, are overlooked on the basis of these superficial distinctions. This leads to unfair and unjust treatment.

Believers must not show favoritism. It is incompatible with Christian faith. The object of our faith is Jesus Christ, who is called “our glorious Lord.” Jesus is the manifestation of God’s glory (Col 1:15). Though Jesus is the almighty Creator God,

he humbled himself and became a human being and dwelt among us. Jesus became the friend of all kinds of people and welcomed anyone and everyone who came to him with faith. Jesus never showed favoritism to rich and powerful people. He told an influential leader Nicodemus, "You must be born again." He told a rich young ruler, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Mk 10:21). Once Jesus was invited to a wealthy, prominent Pharisee's house for dinner. Jesus rebuked him for inviting only rich people and said, "...when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed" (Lk 14:13-14a). Jesus called a tax collector, Matthew, to be his disciple, saying, "Follow me" (Mt 9:9). He also humbly asked a despised Samaritan woman, "Will you give me a drink?" (Jn 4:7) Showing favoritism is far from the Spirit of Jesus. As his followers, we must not show favoritism. Favoritism gives undue honor and glory to human beings, rather than God. Jesus is God whose glory and beauty are beyond comparison to any human being. Jesus is worthy of all glory and honor. We should not be overly impressed by human beings, no matter how wealthy or powerful they are, but give full glory to Jesus.

Showing favoritism is also contrary to the character of God. God does not show favoritism (Ac 10:34; Ro 2:11; Gal 2:6; Eph 6:9). When Samuel went to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the next king, he saw Eliab and thought "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1Sa 16:6-7). We should not make judgments about others based on outward appearance. We should see a person's heart and especially their character. This is what Martin Luther King Jr. hoped for America. He said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."¹ In our glorious Lord Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28).

Verse 1 is a general statement about not showing favoritism. In verses 2-4 James gives a specific example and uncovers the motive for showing favoritism. Suppose two unexpected people came to our worship service at the same time. One of them is dressed in a designer suit, has a big diamond ring on his finger and

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mlks-content-of-character-quote-inspires-debate/>

wears a rolex watch. The other person is wearing an old, dirty sweatshirt, and faded jeans with holes in the knees, and badly needs a shower. How would you respond? Suppose Warren Buffet attended our worship service and offered \$1,000,000, while a poor person attended and offered \$0.25. How would you react? Honestly, we may be tempted to show more attention to the rich. Or suppose a handsome, intelligent, popular student from a prestigious university came in at the same time as an unattractive, ordinary student. How would you respond? In fact, it is not easy to welcome everyone with the same measure of care and respect. If we show special attention to a rich person, giving them a good seat, while ignoring the poor, we discriminate against the poor. Then we become judges with evil thoughts. Judgment belongs to God. The standard of judgment should be God's standard. If we show favoritism to some based on our own human standard we are exposed as judges with evil thoughts.

When we hear that believers should not show favoritism, we may assume that the church should be pro-poor and anti-rich, pro-uneducated and anti-intellectual. But this misses the point. The Bible does not teach us to despise the wealthy just because they are wealthy. It teaches us that those with wealth should use it generously to serve God and needy people (Lk 12:21; 1Ti 6:17-19). Moreover the Bible does not tell us to side with widows and the poor just because of their situation. Leviticus 19:15 says, "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly." Believers should not see people based on outward appearance, but with spiritual insight based on the truth. Jesus said, "Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly" (Jn 7:24).

Second, further reasons believers must not show favoritism (5-11). In verses 5-11 James gives further reasons why believers must not show favoritism. In verses 5-7, he teaches that showing favoritism goes against the nature of God's work and also invalidated their own experience. Verse 5 says, "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?" This does not mean that God favors the poor. But generally the poor are humble and respond well to the gospel message. Often, poverty produces philosophers who think deeply about the meaning of life. On the other hand, in the times of material abundance, it is sinful human nature to forget about God (Pr 30:9a). God chooses the poor when they humbly accept Jesus with faith. Though they are despised in the eyes of the world, they are rich in faith and inherit the kingdom of

God. Why does God work in this way? 1 Corinthians 1:28-29 say, “God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” This is why favoritism goes against the nature of God’s work.

To favor the rich also invalidated the believers’ own experiences. Verses 6-7 tell us what the rich were doing to the believers. The rich exploited the poor for cheap labor and oppressed them through a biased court system. The rich were also blaspheming Christ’s noble name. To grasp the meaning of this passage, we need to understand the world of James’ time, which was dominated by Greco-Roman culture. The social and economic pyramid of the Roman Empire was incredibly steep with virtually no middle class. Eight percent of the population had wealth; another two percent were gaining it. Ninety percent lived in conditions that we would describe as poor. Those who were rich despised the poor. There was no movement between classes, like we experience today.² As the gospel was preached, it began to break down the barriers between rich and poor. Many poor people accepted the gospel with faith. Then they were persecuted by the rich and powerful who felt that their faith threatened the status quo. The rich dragged them into court and blasphemed the name of Christ to whom they belonged. This had been their experience. When they remembered their own experience, they should realize how evil it is to show favoritism and resist doing so.

Finally, James teaches, in verses 8-11, that showing favoritism goes against the royal law found in Scripture. Jesus summarized God’s commands in the Old Testament regarding human relationships: Love your neighbor as yourself (Mk 12:31). If we love our neighbors, we will do them no harm (Ro 13:10). If we really keep this royal law, we are doing right. But if we show favoritism, we sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers (8-9). The law requires perfect obedience--100%. Even though someone keeps the law 99.9% of the time, if they break it on one point, just one time, they become lawbreakers (10-11). There is no mercy in the law. Before the law, everyone is judged guilty and becomes a lawbreaker. God’s purpose in giving the law was not that we might be saved through keeping the law, but to help us realize that we are sinners so that we may come to Jesus by faith and receive his salvation (Gal 3:22).

² Nystrom, David P., *The NIV Application Commentary: James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), pp. 123-124.

We may think that favoritism is not serious. Many people do not regard it as sin. But James says that favoritism is sin. It is breaking the law and is as serious as committing adultery or murder. Usually those who show favoritism are self-righteous. They think they are better than other people based on their human condition and they judge others with their own standard. But God sees our self-righteousness like filthy rags (Isa 64:6). Those who are self-righteous are proud. God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. This is why showing favoritism is a serious sin against God. It is something that we must repent for without making excuses, justifying ourselves or compromising.

Third, show mercy (12-13). These verses are the practical application to James' teaching about not showing favoritism. In verses 8-9, James said that showing favoritism is a sin against this royal law: "Love your neighbor as yourself." In verse 12 James says that this law should be the standard for believers' speech and action. In the New Living Translation, verse 12 says, "So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free." If we have favoritism in our hearts, it will be exposed by what we say and do. In that moment, we put ourselves in the judge's position passing judgment on others. When we do so, we should remember that we will be judged by this law. This law is the standard of word and deed for believers. This law guides us, restrains us and corrects us. As we struggle to practice this law, we realize that we are sinners who have no right to judge others. Rather, we deserve judgement. Then we can ask God's mercy. God's mercy brings forgiveness and enables us to keep the law. God's mercy will triumph over judgment and set us free. In God's mercy, there is no self-righteousness, self-glory, boasting, or judgmental attitude toward others; there is only forgiveness of sins, unconditional love, and saving grace.

If we do not practice God's mercy, there will be serious consequences. Verse 13 says, "There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you" (NLT). In fact, judging others comes from lack of mercy. When Jesus welcomed sinners and had eating fellowship with them, the Pharisees criticized him. Jesus told them, "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt 9:13). We were all terrible sinners. Without God's mercy, no one would avoid eternal condemnation. But God is so merciful that he gave his one and only Son Jesus as a ransom for sinners. Anyone

who believes in Jesus will be saved. As God is merciful, so we should be merciful to others.

Jesus taught his disciples the importance of practicing mercy through the parable of the unmerciful servant. Our debt of sin to God was like ten thousand bags of gold, which was impossible to repay. When we asked for mercy, God canceled our debt of sin out of his great mercy. Now we are free from the great burden of sin. Comparatively, the debt we may claim from others is very small, like a hundred silver coins, which is nothing. If we insist that others should pay their debt to us, we become like the unmerciful servant. The unmerciful servant was handed over to the jailers until he paid back all he owed. Jesus said, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (Mt 18:23-35). It is essential that we practice God's mercy toward others. When we do so, we can triumph over judgment. In the time of judgement, no one can stand before God on their merit. At that time, all we can say is, "God have mercy on me, a sinner" (Lk 18:13). To receive mercy from God, we should also show mercy toward others.

Still, it is not easy to practice mercy without showing favoritism. Chuck Swindoll tells a story from his days as a soldier in World War II on the island of Okinawa. There was a Sunday worship service regularly which the general attended. The general usually entered late, together with an entourage, and took his favorite seat in the front row, making a disturbance. One Easter Sunday, when so many people attended that they were standing outside the door, the chaplain had the ushers fill all the seats available. When the general arrived, he found a private sitting in his normal seat. After this event, the chaplain was transferred to another island. It was costly for him to practice God's mercy without showing favoritism.³ Let's show mercy to others, without favoritism, even if it is costly.

³ Swindoll, Charles R., *Swindoll's Living Insights: James, 1&2 Peter* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2014) p. 51.