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Rich Man, Poor Man James 2:1-13 Part Five

The theme of this epistle is “Tests of Living Faith.” This epistle was written so that we might know whether we are saved or not saved. The very first test that we find in this epistle is the “Response to Trials Test” in **James 1:2-18**. The second test that we considered was the “Response to the Word” test in **James 1.19-27**. We are now considering the third test in this epistle and that is the “The Impartiality Test” in **James 2:1-13**.

Let us read this section of Scripture: **“My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. (2) For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, (3) and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” (4) have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? (5) Listen my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (6) But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? (7) Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? (8) If, however, you are fulfilling 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 and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. (11) For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. (12) So speak and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. (13) For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”** This passage deals with the sin of personal favoritism.

Personal favoritism is a crippling sin within a church body. When professing believers begin to look at people within their church and ask, “How can this person minister to me?” rather than asking, “How can I minister to this person?” they will inevitably make distinctions between people based on personal favoritism. And when this happens the church is in trouble! When a person comes into a church group and asks, “How can this group minister to me?” rather than asking, “How can I minister to this group?”, they will inevitably make distinctions between groups based on personal favoritism. When this happens the church is in trouble. Whenever a person approaches people will a mind set of being served rather than serving, the sin of personal favoritism will raise it’s ugly head. I am hopeful that the study of this passage in James will help root out this sin from this fellowship not only reassuring each of you that you in fact possess saving faith but protecting this fellowship from the severe consequences that will inevitably result from this sin being present among us. In order to help us better understand and appreciate this passage I have broken it down into five parts.

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The first area that we considered was the principle in **V. 1**. Let us read **James 2:1** **“My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.”** What is the principle which, in this verse, is so succinctly stated? For us to profess faith in the gospel of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ while holding an attitude of personal favoritism is contradictory and incompatible. Personal favoritism is a very ugly sin because it is the antithesis of how Jesus responded to people. Jesus, in every situation, was concerned only with what? Service! When he approached people Jesus did not size them up by their outward appearance and determine whether or not he was going to serve them or not serve them. He always, in each and every situation, was committed to serving, not looking at what he could get but rather at what he could give.

The second area of teaching that we considered was “the example” in **VV. 2-4**, **“For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, (3) and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “you stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” (4) have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?”** This certainly is not the only scenario where personal favoritism can be exercised, but in the time period that James is writing, distinctions being made on the basis of material wealth were certainly a matter of great concern.

The third area of teaching that we have considered is “The Inconsistency” in **VV. 5-7** **“Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (6) But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? (7) Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?”** For the readers to show preferential treatment of the rich over the poor was totally inconsistent. How was it inconsistent? Their preferential treatment was first of all inconsistent with God’s choice of the poor. And secondly it was inconsistent because of the hostile actions of the rich. We will now go to the fourth area of teaching.

THE VIOLATION

We will call this fourth area of teaching “THE VIOLATION.” Let us read **VV. 8-11**, **“If, however, you are fulfilling 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 and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.”**

As we begin to examine this particular section that we have entitled “The Violation”, James begins in **V. 8** with a commendation. What is the commendation? **“If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.”** Not all of his readers were guilty of personal favoritism.

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And in fact James knew that there was one group of believers among his readers who were absolutely not guilty. And those believers were those who were “fulfilling the royal law.”

The “royal law” is defined by James in this verse as “loving your neighbor as yourself.” Why is this command to love called the “royal law?” There are a number of different answers that could be given to this question but the most common and I believe the best answer is, the command to love is called “royal” because Christ himself identifies it as supreme over all others. In **Matt. 22:34-40** we read these words, **“But when the Pharisees heard that He (Referring to Jesus) had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. (35) And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, (36) “Teacher, which is the great commandment of the Law?” (37) And He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all our soul and with all your mind.” (38) The second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (40) On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”** Undergirding and supporting every command of Scripture is “love” and that appears to be the reason why Christ calls these two commandments the “greatest.” The first command governs our vertical relationship with the Lord, and the second command governs our horizontal relationship with mankind. In light of the comment of Christ, our King, concerning the supremacy of this law as it pertains to governing human relationships, it is not surprising that James would call it the “royal law.”

If we will in fact follow this law, the “royal law”, the law of love, James tells us in **V.8** that we will “do well.” How well will we do? Paul tells us in **Rom. 13:8-10**, **“Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbors fulfills the law. (9) For this, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet, and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** How well will we do if we fulfill the “royal law?” We will fulfill the whole law.

Because of the significance of us fulfilling the royal law, it is very important that we fully understand what this verse is saying. It does not say that we are to love our spouse as ourselves. It does not say that we are to love our children as ourselves. It does not say we are to love our best friends as ourselves. What does it say? It tells that we are to love our “neighbor” as ourselves. And who is our neighbor? According to the parable of the good Samaritan in **Luke 10:30-37**, our neighbor is any needy person who crosses our path.

Look around you this morning. How many needy people are in this room? I believe that the answer to that question is, everyone in this room is in some way needy. When you go out into your community tomorrow, how many of the people that you will meet will be needy in some way? I believe that the answer to that question is, everyone that you will meet will be in some way needy.

May the Lord protect us from becoming so self-centered and self-serving that all we can see is our need or the need of our immediate family. This is not the way of Christ. If this is how we are operating then we need to confess our sin and ask the Lord to open our eyes to the needs of people.

But someone might ask, “But if our eyes are opened and we begin to see the need of everyone who crosses our path, does that mean that we are responsible for everyone that crosses our path? Yes!

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I believe that I am responsible for the needs of my family. I believe that as I look over the fence or across the street at my neighbors and see their need, that I am responsible. I believe as I look out over this congregation this weekend and see your need, I am responsible for you as well. I am responsible for all no matter what differences I might notice between them.

Will I be able to meet the needs of my family, friends, neighbors and this congregation? The answer is obviously no! We are finite and have limited resources. But the Lord is not. So let us offer up to the Lord our bread and fishes. Let us offer up to the Lord our limited resources and let him multiply them to the praise of His glory.

As our eyes are opened and we are able to see the needs of the people that God brings across our path, and if we seek to minister to those needs without making distinctions between people, does this mean that we will treat everyone the same? And the answer of course is no! There are some people in this room this morning I have personally greeted. I have done this because I believe that this is a good and kind thing to do. But there are others that I have not greeted. Why? Is it because I don't care about every single person in this room? I certainly would hope that would not be the reason. Is it because I prefer certain people over others? I certainly would hope that would not be the reason. The reason I believe I have not greeted everyone is manifold. But the biggest reason by far is simply because there is only one of me and there is a limited amount of time and opportunity.

But someone might say, “But how can we love our neighbor as our self if we don't love ourselves?” Contrary to what many teachers claim today, Scripture does not teach that we must learn to love ourselves before we can properly love others. Quite the contrary: the Scripture assumes we love ourselves. **Eph. 5:29** says, “**no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it.**” People may feel badly about themselves but this does not mean that they do not love themselves.

They get up each morning and brush their teeth and comb their hair. They choose certain clothes to put on. They seek out something to eat. And if there is any discomfort at all they will try to alleviate that discomfort as best they can. People quite naturally are determined to make their lives as comfortable and happy as possible. Why? Because they hate themselves or because they love themselves? Because they love themselves. Oh, it may be true that we may feel badly about certain things we believe about ourselves but this does not mean that we stop loving ourselves. In fact this is so ingrained in the human psyche that I don't believe that there would be a single person here this morning that we could describe as not loving themselves.

James is telling us in **V. 8** that if we would simply care for others, as we become aware of their needs without making distinctions, as much as we care for ourselves, we will do very well. And if we don't choose to do this then the alternative is given us in **V. 9**, “**But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.**” If we fail to live by the royal law, James makes clear in this verse that we have sinned and have become a transgressor of the law.

The word “sin” (HAMARTIA) pertains to missing the mark of God's standard of righteousness.

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The word “transgressor” (PARABATES) refers to someone who willfully goes beyond God’s prescribed limits.

In the one case, a person comes short; in the other, he goes too far. Both are sinful, just as adding to or subtracting from God’s revealed Word is sinful. James in **V. 9** tells us we are sinning when we show partiality. James in **V. 9** tells us that we have become a transgressor when we show partiality. But just to make sure someone does not say “But this is such a little sin” he now gives us **V. 10**.

“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.” In order to become a transgressor it is only necessary to disobey a single commandment, for we are obligated to keep God’s whole law, not merely part of it. God’s law is unified; it all hangs together and is inseparable.

James, in order to explain what he means by this statement quotes from **Ex. 20:13-14** and **Deut. 5:17-18** in **James 2:11**, **“For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.”** James chose two of the most serious social sins, in both cases the breaking of which demanded the penalty of death. Perhaps he chose those in order to illustrate the extreme sinfulness of partiality. But he could have used any of God’s law to make the same point. It only takes the breaking of one commandment, any commandment, to **“become a transgressor of the law.”**

The Jews tended to regard the law as a series of detached commands. To keep one of those commands was to gain credit. To break one was to incur debt. Therefore, a man could add up the ones he kept and subtract the ones he broke and, as it were, emerge with a moral credit or debit balance.

That philosophy, of course, is common to every works-righteousness system of religion. The idea is that acceptance or rejection by God depends essentially on the moral standing of the person himself. If he does more good than bad, he is accepted by God. If the scale tilts the other way, he is rejected.

That totally unbiblical notion is firmly believed by many, many people, including many so-called professing believers. God’s standard, however, is perfection. Jesus declared in **Matt. 5:48**, **“Therefore you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** God will accept nothing less. But because no sinful human being can possibly attain to that perfection, God has graciously provided for it to be imputed through the vicarious atonement of His sinless Son.

In **Rom. 5** Paul wrote, **“Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly..... But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation (Rom. 5:1,6,8,10-11).**

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The Jewish leaders in New Testament times recognized that no person could possibly keep every commandment for an entire lifetime. They rationalized that God's grace therefore led Him to overlook most disobedience. Some rabbis even taught that obedience to just one essential commandment was sufficient to satisfy God. Such warped, ungodly reasoning removes the sinfulness of sin and corrupts not only God's law but also His grace. It was their self-righteousness that prevented them from seeing their need for a Savior, which is why those Jewish leaders so vehemently opposed Jesus Christ and the gospel of substitutionary atonement that He both proclaimed and fulfilled.

Both the Old Testament as well as the New clearly affirm that there is no grace in God's law. There is grace in the gospel of Christ but there is no grace in the law. Without exception, breaking God's law requires judgment and appropriate punishment. There is no such thing as a small, inconsequential or unpunishable sin, and that certainly includes the sin of personal favoritism.

CONCLUSION

James was written so that we might know whether or not our faith is genuine.

The first test was the "Response to Trials" test.

The second test was the "Response to the Word" test.

And we are now approaching the conclusion of the third test which is the "Impartiality" test.

My hope and my prayer as we have been exploring this particular test would be that the sin of personal favoritism would be rooted out from among us. And I know on the basis of God's word that we will be doing well in this area if we would understand and diligently seek by the grace of God to fulfill the "ROYAL LAW". And what is the royal law? "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."