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

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 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 our 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. In order to best understand this particular section of Scripture we have divided it into five different areas.

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. In order to help this principle to come alive for us James goes to a second area of teaching.

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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 fourth area of teaching that we have considered is “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.**” Those who violate the “royal law” expose themselves to the sin of personal favoritism. But those who practice the royal law will do well.

They will do well because they will not be looking at what they can gain as much as what they can give. This will protect them from making distinctions on the basis of what will serve them.

There is a woman in this congregation that will be moving soon. And she made the observation that people in her apartment complex seem to be withdrawing from her. Why might people do that? It might be that they no longer see her as a person who will be potentially contributing to their lives. And because of this they might not be interested in meeting her needs because they may believe that there will not be a future benefit to them. If this were true, they would be guilty of personal favoritism. They would be guilty of violating the royal law. They would not be loving their neighbor as themselves. If the Good Samaritan had this mentality, he might not ever have stopped to help the man who had been beaten and robbed.

Those who are practicing the “royal law” are not so concerned with what they will receive but rather in meeting the need of that person who has crossed their path.

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If a young person goes into their church youth group and chooses not to attend that group simply because they are not comfortable with the various young people that make up that group, and they make no attempt to get to know the people or to discern their needs, have they not made the decision not to attend on the basis of themselves and their felt needs, rather than on the needs of the people that make up the group? If this is true, then that young person who withdraws from the group has made distinctions. They are willing to be with people and minister to people that make them comfortable but are not willing to be with people and to minister to people that do not make them comfortable. They have violated the royal law and have not loved their neighbor as themselves.

If you have a neighbor who is difficult and ornery, but make no attempt to serve him and to meet his needs, have you not made distinctions and shown personal favoritism? You are willing to serve those neighbors who are pleasant and who make you feel good but are unwilling to get close enough to the problem neighbor to help and assist them in their need. This is a violation of the royal law.

We must not let ourselves be lulled into thinking that the sin of personal favoritism is not a serious sin. We saw that to some degree last week and we will see it even more clearly as we come to the fifth area of teaching in this passage. Which we will call “The Appeal.”

What is my hope for this lesson this morning? My hope is that this lesson will move us to apply even greater energy to rooting out any vestige of personal favoritism from our lives. My hope is that this study will help lead this church body to holiness in the way we relate to one another.

The Appeal

James has just pointed out to his readers that personal favoritism, which is a violation of the royal law, is sin. When this sin is committed we become a transgressor of the law and we are just as guilty before the Lord as a murderer or an adulterer. With this in mind, he issues to us an appeal. Let us read **VV. 12-13**, “**So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.**” In light of the seriousness of the sin of personal favoritism and the certainty of future judgment, he wants his readers to speak and act in a specific way.

The type of speaking and the type of acting that James appeals for his readers to perform is not optional, they are both commands, and their speaking and acting needs to be put in the context of the “royal law.” They need to love their neighbor as themselves in their speaking. They need to love their neighbor as themselves in their actions. This is only reasonable for those who are going “**to be judged by the law of liberty.**” What does James mean when he says this?

To answer this question we need to understand the significance of “**the law of liberty,**” and we also need to understand something about the “**judgment**” James is referring to in this verse.

What is the “**law of liberty?**” We find help in answering this question earlier in the epistle. Let us go back to **James 1:25** and read what James writes there. “**But the one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.**”

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The “implanted word” referred to in **V. 21** and “the word” in **V. 22** is now referred to as “**law.**” James, in choosing this term to refer to the Word of God, communicates very powerfully the matter of its authority. And the reason why he calls it the “perfect law” is because he sees God’s Word as the “perfect authority.” **Ps. 19:7-9** says, “**The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple, (8) the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. (9) The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.**” This is how the Psalmist viewed the Scriptures. This is the way James viewed the Scriptures. But James does not stop with calling the Scriptures the “**perfect law.**”

Look again at **James 1:25** and see another title that James gives to the Scriptures. “**But the one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty ...**” Not only are the Scriptures referred to as the “**perfect law**” but the Scriptures are also referred to as what? The “**law of liberty.**” This is the very same phrase we see in **James 2:12**. What does James mean when he refers to the Scriptures as the “law of liberty.” The “law of liberty” is simply referring to the Scriptures and their power to set us free from the bondage of sin. Certainly this is not accomplished by us keeping the moral law of God which is impossible. But rather it is accomplished when we by faith embrace the gospel of Christ which is contained in the Scripture. It is the gospel of Christ that sets us free from sin and makes it possible for us, by the grace of God, to live the Christian life and fulfill the moral law of God which is also contained in the Scriptures.

When the world thinks of the Bible and the truths that are contained in this wonderful book, they don’t see the Scriptures as the “law of liberty.” At best they just see it as “a law.” When James addresses his readers and speaks about a future judgment that will be based on the “law of liberty” he is not appealing to their fear, but to their gratitude as professing believers.

If I were one of his readers and James said to me, “Dale, so speak and so act as one who will be judged by the law of liberty,” I am going to understand that he is appealing to me to speak and act as a person who truly has been born again and understands and wants to live a life that testifies to the saving power of the Scriptures, the “law of liberty.”

But someone here might say, “But he is speaking of a judgment, shouldn’t that fill us with fear?” And the answer for the truly born again believer who possesses genuine faith is “NO!” Let us for a moment consider the theme of biblical judgment.

Every person who has ever lived will stand before Christ in judgment and their works will be judged. Let us listen to **Rom. 2:6-11**, “**To those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness wrath and indignation, there will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.**”

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For unbelievers, they will stand before Him at the Great White Throne Judgment, which is described for us in **Rev. 20:11-15**, and the judgment of their works will result in eternal damnation.

For believers, they will stand before Him at what is called the “judgment seat of Christ,” which is described in **1 Cor. 3:10-15**, **2 Cor. 5:9-11** and the judgment of their works will result in reward.

If we have not come to see and experience the Scriptures as the law of liberty then the prospect of the judgment of our works should produce terror. But if we have come to the place in our lives where we see the Scriptures as James represents them here in James 2:12, then the prospect of this judgment should bring us a sense of positive anticipation, for it is not a judgment that will result in damnation, but rather reward.

We need to be careful at this point to emphasize that just because the Scriptures teach us that God’s judgment’s are based on works, it does not mean that we are saved by works. How are we saved? We are saved by grace through faith.

One of James’s major themes is that a person’s real faith will be manifest in and through his works. In **James 2:26** James says, “**for just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.**” And this is exactly James point here in **V. 12**.

If God looks at our life and sees that we have responded to trials properly, if God looks at our life and sees that we have responded to the Word properly, if God looks at our life and sees that we have treated people in our lives impartially, speaking and acting in such a way that is consistent with the royal law, all of this gives evidence of our salvation, a salvation not secured by works, but rather by faith. Paul states unequivocally that “**we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand so that we would walk in them.**” Good works cannot produce redemption, but genuine redemption produces obedient and holy living that will be characterized by good works. Living faith will be demonstrated by a holy life, by a life that responds to trials properly, that responds to the Word properly, and which treats people according to the “royal law” and avoids personal favoritism.

Having said all this now let us look at **V. 13**, “**For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy, mercy triumphs over judgment.**” In commenting on this verse we must make it clear that James is not talking about a person who is positively responding to the appeal in **V. 12**. That person would be characterized by what? MERCY. **V. 13** is talking about the person who may read **V. 12** and does not respond to it, who does not show mercy.

What is mercy? “Mercy” is the outward manifestation of pity and compassion in kindly action toward the misery of another. It looks not at what the man deserves but what he needs, and will respond accordingly in word and deed.

He is talking about the person who, as a way of life, is simply caught up in his or her own problems, who lives to have his or her own need met and habitually does not come to the assistance of their neighbor. They do not look on others with the eyes of Christ or with the heart of Christ.

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They are consistently violating the “royal law” and fail to love their neighbor as themselves. For them, the verse tells us that their judgment will be “**merciless.**”

This judgment is of course referring to the judgment of unbelievers. It is referring to the Great White Throne Judgment. At this particular judgment there will be no mercy. But for the one who does in fact “so speak and so act as one who will be judged by the law of liberty,” we have a wonderful declaration at the end of the verse. The last phrase is “**mercy triumphs over judgment.**”

Listen carefully to what I am about to say. Mercy does not triumph at the expense of justice; the triumph of mercy is based on the atonement wrought at Calvary. We do not receive mercy because we are merciful, that would make salvation a matter of human merit. The practice of mercy toward others is the evidence that God’s grace has produced a transformation in us.

CONCLUSION

One day, hopefully each of us, as those who have given evidence of our salvation by a proper response to trials, by a proper response to the Word, by impartially loving the people that God brings across our path, will stand before the Lord and receive the crown of righteousness, not damned but delivered.