

Lesson Four – James 2:1-13

James has already introduced the themes of rich and poor and discrimination (vv. 9-11) and being doers of the Word (vv. 22-25) in chapter one. He established by argument and illustration that the only faith that will make a person blessed is that which results in obedience to Christ's commands. He enlarges on both of those themes in chapter two.

- 1) No partiality (Greek, lit. "receiving the face"; it is to make judgments and distinctions based on external considerations, such as physical appearance, social status or race.) is allowable (vv. 1-13); the way we treat people is one of the things that indicates what we really believe about God. 1 John 4:20.
- 2) James begins by "inviting" two visitors to the assembly.
  - a) One is well dressed with gold rings on his fingers. The more ostentatious of the ancients wore rings on every finger except the middle one and wore far more than one on each finger. They even hired rings to wear when they wished to give an impression of special wealth. (Does this remind you of Academy Award night?)
    - i) Seneca said, "We adorn our fingers with rings and we distribute gems over every joint.
    - ii) Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – 211/216) recommended that a Christian should wear only one ring, and that he should wear it on his little finger. It ought to have on it a religious emblem, such as a dove, a fish or an anchor; and the justification for wearing it is that it might be used as a seal.
  - b) When these two men come into the assembly, one well dressed and elegantly be-ringed, the other dressed in poor clothes because he has no others and obviously unadorned by jewels, the rich man is ushered to a place of honor with ceremony and respect, the poor man is bidden to stand, or squat on the floor, beside the foot-stool of the well-to-do.
- 3) In this section James discusses four basic Christian doctrines in light of the way that we treat other people.
  - a) The deity of Christ. 2:1-4.
    - i) Verse one admonishes not to hold the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ with respect of persons.
      - (1) Verse one is one of the only two explicit references to Jesus Christ in James' letter.
        - (a) From those two as well as from the entire tenor of the letter, we know that James believed that Jesus is the promised Messiah.
        - (b) He is the Lord, the one who occupies the supreme position at God's right hand and who is bringing all of God's enemies into submission before Him. 1 Cor. 15:25.
        - (c) Not only is Jesus the Lord, He is the Lord of Glory.

- (i) Some suggest that this should be “the Lord who is the Glory,” perhaps referencing the Shekinah, the representation of God’s presence in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple until it departed in the days of Ezekiel.
  - (ii) Probably better as it stands in the KJV which perhaps references the heavenly sphere to which He has been exalted.
  - (iii) It is His law that we are not to hold with respect of persons.
- ii) We have this problem with us today.
- (1) Almost every congregation has its cliques, and often new Christians and new members are slowly accepted, if ever.
  - (2) Some of the Christians whom James addressed were of this nature and were trying to seize leadership positions (teachers or masters, depending on how you translate 3:1).
  - (3) Jesus was not a respecter of persons.
    - (a) Even the Pharisees admitted this truth. Matt. 22:16.
    - (b) He was not impressed with riches or social status.
      - (i) In the poor widow who gave her mite he saw one greater than the Pharisees who gave of their superfluity.
      - (ii) He saw the potential in the lives of people.
        - 1. In Simon he saw a rock.
        - 2. In the publican Matthew, he saw a faithful disciple who would one day write one of the accounts of his life and preaching.
        - 3. In the sinner woman at the well he saw an instrument for reaping a great harvest.
    - (c) We are prone to judge people by their past, not their future.
      - (i) When Paul was converted, the church in Jerusalem was afraid to receive him and it took Barnabas who believed in Paul’s conversion to break down the walls (Acts 9:26-28).
      - (ii) We often judge people by whether they are “our kind of people” rather than the inner attitude of their heart.
      - (iii) A favoritism based on external considerations is inconsistent with faith in the One who came to break down barriers of nationality, race, class, or gender (Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28-29).
      - (iv) The church may not be the only place, but it must be one place where men stand equal, eye to eye. William Barkley stated it beautifully: “The Church must be the one place where all distinctions are wiped out. There can be no distinctions of rank and prestige when men meet in the presence of the King of glory. There can be no distinctions of merit when men meet in the presence of the supreme holiness of God. In his presence all earthly distinctions are less than the dust and all earthly righteousness is as filthy rags. In the presence of God all men are one.”

- (v) Put another way, when you love one another with Christ's love, you are always at eye level. You can neither look up at another nor down. Everyone who comes into our lives is on one level, whether rich or poor, bathed or unbathed, impressive or unimpressive.
  - (vi) Jesus was the friend of sinners, though he disapproved of their sins; it was not compromise but compassion that caused him to welcome them.
- (4) Jesus was despised and rejected.
- (a) Isaiah prophesied it would be so (Isa. 53:1-3) and the prophecy was fulfilled (John 1:11).
  - (b) The religious experts of Jesus day judged him by human standards.
    - (i) He came from the wrong city, Nazareth of Galilee.
    - (ii) He was not a graduate of their accepted schools.
    - (iii) He did not have the official sanction of the people in power.
    - (iv) He had no wealth.
    - (v) His followers were a nondescript bunch and included publicans and sinners.
    - (vi) Yet he was the very glory of God; no wonder Jesus warned the religious leaders to "judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment." John 7:24.
  - (c) Are we guilty of the same thing?
    - (i) Do we judge visitors by what how they appear, by what socio-economic scale they might appear to enjoy?
    - (ii) Do we cater to those whom we think might "fit in" and avoid or think less of those who are not like us?
    - (iii) Jesus did not do this and he does not approve it.
    - (iv) It is this very illustration that James uses to illustrate his point (vv. 2-3).
  - (d) How do we practice the deity of Christ in our human relations?
    - (i) It is really quite simple: look at everyone through the eyes of Christ.
    - (ii) It is Christ who is the link between us and others, and he is a link of love.
    - (iii) The basis for relationship with others is the person and work of Jesus Christ.
    - (iv) Any other basis is not going to work.
    - (v) Furthermore, God can use even the most unlikely person to bring glory to his name, even those who might not be like us and whom we might reject.
  - (e) In v. 4 James reaches his "then" clause after the two "if" clauses of vv. 2 and 3.
    - (i) He asks, are you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

- (ii) Not only have they arrogated to themselves the position of judges, even worse they render their judgment based upon worldly standards.
- b) The grace of God is extended without favor (2:5-7), which demonstrates the inconsistency with God's law and practice of those who apply such worldly standards.
  - i) God ignores national differences (Acts 10:34).
    - (1) The Jewish believers were shocked when Peter went to the Gentile household of Cornelius, preached to them and even ate with them.
    - (2) The first church council in Jerusalem addressed whether a Gentile could become a Christian without first becoming a Jew (Acts 15).
    - (3) In the sight of God there is no difference between Jew and Gentile when it comes to salvation (Gal. 3:28-29).
  - ii) God ignores social differences.
    - (1) Masters and slaves, rich and poor are alike to him.
    - (2) James has already taught us that God makes the poor man rich and the rich man poor.
    - (3) The early church seemed to have more of the poor than rich.
      - (a) Paul described the Corinthian church as having "not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: (1 Corinthians 1:26); there were poor among the Jerusalem and Palestinian churches; the Antioch church sent relief to them in about 46 A.D., and Paul collected money from Gentile churches to send to the "poor saints in Jerusalem (cf. Rom. 15:26).
      - (b) James tells us "Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him (James 2:5)?"
      - (c) One can be poor in this world and rich in the next, rich in this world and poor in the next, or poor in both or rich in both; God gives the crown of life to those who love him and not to those who love the world and the things of the world. 1 John 2:15.
      - (d) Should we be tempted to judge based on social differences we should remember James stern rebuke 2:6-7).
        - (i) In that day it was easy for the rich to oppress the poor and make themselves richer by influencing decisions at court.
        - (ii) In contrast to God's benevolent attitude toward the poor, taking advantage of the poor blasphemes the very name of Jesus.
          - 1. Far from returning kindness for kindness, they are heaping honor precisely on those who are actively engaged in oppressing and persecuting the small community of believers.
          - 2. How incongruous that those who blaspheme the honorable name by which they were called should be accorded preferential treatment.

- (4) The doctrine of God's grace, if we really believe it, compels us to relate to people on the basis of God's plan and not on the basis of human merit or social status.
  - (a) A class church is not a church that magnifies God.
  - (b) When he died Jesus broke down the wall that separated Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-22).
  - (c) But in his birth and life he broke down the walls between rich and poor, young and old, educated and uneducated.
  - (d) It is wrong for us to rebuild those walls and we cannot do so if we believe in the grace of God.
- c) The Word of God (vv. 8-11).
  - (1) V. 8 begins with a contrast between following the "royal law" and the conduct of v. 6, doing evil in dishonoring the poor. While there is some disagreement over whether the word translated "however" is adversative or affirmative (translated "really," RSV), there is no excuse for ignoring it as do the KJV and the NIV.
  - ii) Many battles have been fought over the inspiration and authority of the Scripture, but we must remember that one of our best defenses of the Word is our lives before and our love for each other and for the lost.
  - iii) James reached back to the Old Testament for one of God's laws, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18).
    - (1) Why is "love thy neighbor" called the "royal law"?
      - (a) It was given by the King – God the Father gave the law and God the Son reaffirmed it (John 13:34).
      - (b) It rules all other laws (Rom. 13:10); there would be no need for the thousands of laws that govern us if each citizen truly loved his neighbor.
      - (c) It makes you a king.
        - (i) Hatred makes a person a slave, but love sets us free from selfishness and enables us to reign like kings.
        - (ii) Love enables us to obey the word of God and to treat people like God commands us to do.
        - (iii) We obey his law not from fear but out of love.
    - (2) Showing respect of persons can lead to disobeying all of God's law.
      - (a) Once we start acting on the basis of respect of persons and rejecting God's Word, we are not just heading for trouble, we are in trouble.
      - (b) Christian law does not demand that I like a person and agree with him on everything; I may not like his vocabulary, his habits, want him for a intimate friend.
      - (c) What Christian love does mean is that I treat him as God treats me; it is an act of the will not of the emotions that I try to manufacture.
    - (3) We only believe as much of the Bible as we practice.
      - (a) If we fail to obey the "royal law," we will not do much good with the rest.

- (b) A glaring fault of the Pharisees was that they were careful about the lesser matters and careless about the weightier matters (Matt. 23:23).
- (4) James is clear with us – when we show partiality we are sinning and are convicted by the law as transgressors (v.10).
- (5) But how can that be since we have only broken one law? James explains in v. 10 -- if we break one of the laws we are guilty of them all.
- (a) The will of God, like God, is an indivisible all.
- (i) All of us have broken God’s law because even if we keep all of the laws but one, we are guilty of all.
- (ii) The law of God represents the will of God, and rejecting one law is rejecting God’s will that is expressed in all laws.
1. It is not like a pile of stones which, if one is removed, remains a neat, undisturbed whole.
  2. It is more like a mirror which, when violated, is all shattered.
  3. Under the Mosaic code the Jews sought to create their own mercy by distinguishing between the greater and the lesser requirements.
  4. Some commentators have described the rabbis as trying, in effect, to make grace a part of the law by glossing over the distinction between law and grace, by representing that in many matters a sin was not a sin, or, in small matters, that a law was not a law, and that even when it was a sin or a law a man could run sort of a credit and debit account with God, of good deeds and bad and so need not try to do more than keep the balance on the right side.
  5. Some of the rabbis held that, if the laws that were (sometimes rather arbitrarily) counted of prime importance were carefully observed, less or no respect need be given to the others.
    - a. “The Sabbath weighs against all the precepts: if they keep it, they are reckoned as having done all. *Shemoth Rabbu*, xxv (commentary on the Torah.)
    - b. Akiba and Hillel also held that to wear phylacteries was to observe the entire Torah.
  6. Most of us have either consciously or unconsciously attempted to please God in that way; we have tried to live good lives; we have tried to tip the scales in the right direction.
- (b) James refutes that argument as ridiculous: James tells us that we may not have broken all of the laws, in fact, he postulates just one, but that in and by itself condemns us (absent mercy).
- d) The judgment of God (vv. 12-13).

- i) Scripture teaches that there will be a final judgment. 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15.
- ii) Here James brings us before the judgment of God and one of the standards based upon which God will judge.
  - (1) Our words will be judged.
    - (a) Note the words said to the two individuals in v. 3; what we say to people and how we say it will come before God.
    - (b) Since the words we speak come from the heart (Matt. 12:34-37), when God examines our words He is examining our heart.
  - (2) Our deeds will be judged.
    - (a) Colossians 3:22-25 gives insight to this truth.
    - (b) We cannot sin lightly and serve faithfully.
  - (3) Our attitudes will be judged.
    - (a) James contrasts two attitudes: showing mercy to others and refusing to show mercy.
      - (i) Mercy and justice both come from God, so they are not competitors.
      - (ii) Where God finds obedient faith, he is able to show mercy; where He finds rebellion and unbelief He must administer justice.
      - (iii) If we forgive our brothers we have the kind of heart that is open toward the forgiveness of God.
    - (b) The “law of liberty” will judge us.
      - (i) When we obey God’s law it frees us from sin and enables us to walk in liberty. Gal. 5:1.
      - (ii) Law prepares us for liberty.
        - 1. A child must be under rules and regulations because he is not mature enough to handle the decisions and demands of life.
        - 2. Outward discipline is given to develop inward discipline.
        - 3. Liberty does not mean license.
          - a. Doing whatever I want to do is the worst kind of bondage.
          - b. Liberty means the freedom to be all that I can be in Jesus Christ.
      - (iii) God sees our hearts and knows what we would have done if we had been free to do so.
        - 1. The one who obeys only because there are rules has not really matured.
        - 2. What will he do when he gets in a situation where the “rules enforcer” is not present?
        - 3. God’s Word can change our hearts and give us the desire to do His will, so that we obey from inward compulsion and not from outward restraint. 2 Cor. 5:14-15.
  - e) There is one obvious truth to carry away from this section – our beliefs should control our behavior.

- i) If we really believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that God is gracious, that His Word is true, and that one day He will judge us, then our conduct will reflect those beliefs.
- ii) Before we try to correct others for unbelief we must be certain that we practice the doctrines that we defend (Matt. 7:3-5).
- iii) One of the tests that we must pass is how we treat other people; do we pass the test?
  - (1) 7 ¶ Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. 8 He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. 1 John 4:7-8.
  - (2) 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. 12 No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 ¶ Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. 1 John 4:11-13.