

Faith That Works: Love Your Neighbor As Yourself
By Jason Huff
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Leviticus 19:15-18; Mark 12:38-44; James 2:1-13

Our final Scripture reading today is James 2:1-13. May God bless the reading of His holy, infallible, unshakable Word. “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: 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 those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!”

VIP – Very Important Person. The words say it all, don't they? You are very important. What does it mean to be a VIP? In some cases, it means being the guest of honor. If the president comes to your gathering, given his role in the world, he's a VIP. On your wedding day, you and your spouse are the VIPs – at least when things go right. Your birthday. Your anniversary. There are times and places where someone is very important – a performance can't go on without all the band members. A play can't go on without its cast.

But in an awful lot of cases, it's very easy to become a VIP. Nowadays, it's common to see not only front-row seats but backstage passes to concerts where you can meet your favorite artists. You can get into luxury suites at a race – maybe I'm thinking of that because the Indy 500 is running today – or you can get first class seats on a plane. The only difference between being an ordinary person and an extraordinary person is money. Money will buy you the best seats for Hamilton or Rihanna or whatever you want to see. Money will unlock closed doors. Hidden worlds await those who have the cash to make it happen. It's true in virtually any worldly arena. Money makes you important.

And yet the teachings of Jesus are very clear: you can't buy your way into heaven. You can't bribe your way past the pearly gates or purchase a VIP ticket to the throne room of God. But as sinners saved by God's grace, we still have a lot of worldly tendencies to master and remove from our lives, and favoritism is one of them. Today, James' passage spells out for us the sin of favoritism and why it is so important for us to treat everyone according to what James calls “the royal law” – love your neighbor as yourself.

James isn't teaching us a new commandment but an ancient one. In God's ancient law given to the Israelites through Moses, as we heard in Leviticus 19 today, God clearly forbids partiality. Justice demands it. Now we have to read James in light of what Leviticus 19 says: "Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly." James is not telling us that we should lavish affection on the poor and disrespect the rich. Some theologians have stated that God has a preference for the poor based on some readings of passages like this one. But that fundamentally breaks the impartial justice of God we witness throughout Scripture. Instead, what James does is state in provocative terms how lavishly we treat the rich while disrespecting the poor.

James doesn't reference Jesus often in His letter, but here he ties our discipleship to Jesus to our pattern of non-favoritism. Jesus taught not only "love your neighbor as yourself" but "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." We show we believe the words of Jesus when we show love to all without discrimination, and it stands out to the world.

James gives us a particular example of favoritism in the ancient world. He doesn't say that this did happen, *per se*, but all of his listeners would have known of situations like it. The Jews and Romans didn't agree on much, but their shared culture was one of honor and shame. And both cultures undeniably showed honor to the rich. Just coming to faith in Jesus didn't change those engrained cultural paradigms.

In our example, James is wildly extravagant in the Greek – the rich man literally has "golden fingers," the idea being that he's not just wearing a gold ring like what we wear as a wedding band, but that his wealth is on display for all to see. He's wearing the Armani of his day, the best clothes, the finest money can buy. No one can see him and not say, "That guy's loaded." In contrast, the poor man is described as being in rags. He's likely coming to the gathering in the only clothes he has.

The situation, sadly, is not hard to imagine. The guy dressed to the nines is shown the best seat in the house. Meanwhile, the guy in shabby clothes isn't shown a seat at all. He's told there's no seat for him – but you can stand in the back if you want. Or, if he wants, he can sit on the floor. That doesn't seem like a big deal to us, but in the ancient Near East, that was disrespect. People walked everywhere; dirt floors were common and, frankly, floors were often filthy. It's one thing for us to have kids sit on the floor on a carpet we've recently vacuumed. It's something else entirely to sit on a dirt floor where who knows what has been tracked in. And while James was writing to relatively poor people, even then, there was discrimination between those who had something and those who had virtually nothing.

James says when we do this, we have not only discriminated amongst ourselves but also have become judges with evil thoughts. That's blunt but fair. When we see the homeless person and expect them to be a drug addict, when we whisper things about the person with an EBT card at Kroger and post things about what they're buying on Facebook, when we give canned goods three years expired to a food pantry and think they should be grateful, that's evil. The truth is, we get tiny glimpses into people's lives, rarely ever enough to truly understand them and know them, even with people we've known a long time. And yet we would judge folks based on their appearance as rich or poor? How dare we!

How guilty are we of this? It's hard to say; only God knows for certain. This week I was looking for sermon illustrations about pastors dressing up as homeless people and approaching people from their churches to see what responses they'd get. At least one of the most famous illustrations didn't really happen. But I found one instance in 2013 and two in 2018 that had backup. And the results varied. At every church, there were some people who didn't even acknowledge the homeless man when he wished them a happy Thanksgiving. One place had five people ask him to leave! Yet, in at least two of the situations, members asked him if he needed assistance and asked if he'd join them in their worship. The one pastor remembered having tears falling on his fake beard because so many people from his congregation had tried to help him. So it's not universal. It is, however, something we can imagine as common.

James moves on to establish a premise that was controversial in his era but true when we think about Jesus and His earliest followers. He says, "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 those who love him?" James isn't talking about every poor person, of course. But this was a day and age when wealth was understood as a sign of God's favor and true poverty a sign of God's judgment. As we might remember, Jesus' disciples naturally assumed that someone born with a disability like blindness was suffering for his sins or the sins of his parents. Jesus said it wasn't the case, but that the disciples jumped to this shows it was the common understanding of the era.

And we've imported that idea into our own culture too. How many false preachers say that believers can name and claim wealth and prosperity for themselves? Benny Hinn, a famous prosperity gospel preacher, recently denounced the whole thing, saying that he simply couldn't read the Bible the way he did twenty years ago. But that hasn't stopped many others from picking up that mantle. I had a friend who attended a prosperity gospel church sincerely tell me that Mother Teresa wasn't as strong in faith as she should have been; otherwise she could have claimed the prosperity that was hers to have.

James will have none of that. Many of the poor are rich in faith! Many will inherit the Kingdom of God because they love Him! In fact, God has chosen them for this, that they will have faith, that they will love Him – it is not of their doing but God's doing! Stop judging and insulting the poor, James says; they may have greater faith than you have!

And you know what? In terms that really matter, that show faith in action, the poor consistently make a better showing. Studies over decades have shown that the poor in America are far more generous than the rich, helping others, giving of their time and money and talents. Deeper studies have shown that it's due to empathy – those of us without a lot of money or who have been there know what it's like, remember what it's like, and lend a helping hand. The data has shown consistently what James already knew from God: that the poor often live in far greater faith and reliance on God than others.

If that wasn't enough, James shows the hypocrisy of the church favoring the rich. He says, "Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?" It's funny how this portion especially could have been written today and it would seem true.

We aren't talking politically here, because there are rich people on both sides of the aisle; we're talking about the patterns that exist in every nation, every place, in every time. The rich take advantage of the poor. No surprise there to anyone. The rich use the courts to their advantage to get what they want. No surprise. The rich slander God and slander Jesus. Again, just look at the news and the way the rich and famous talk about faith. Why do we put so much stock in the rich, James says? They are far more likely to trust in their wealth than God. As a rule, money makes you believe you don't need God.

An unlikely source proves it, too. The World Economic Forum shows that the United States is the outlier, that almost uniformly, the more purchasing power a country has, the less people are interested in religion. The United States is the only country that bucks that trend. The Pew Forum breaks that down for us too, though – within the United States, the trend holds true. The poor in our country (making under \$30,000 a year) are far more likely to believe in God, believe in Scripture, and to pray regularly than those who make over \$100,000 a year.

And in the early church, just like today, we stumble in this because the church needs money to continue to do the good things it does. That is not in question, nor is it wrong for a church to want to pay its pastor, support godly missions, and have a place to meet. The difficulty comes in who it is that we trust to provide that money. If we trust in God to provide, He will. If we trust in rich people to provide, we're looking in the wrong place.

What is James' key to all of this? You are doing right if you keep the royal law: "Love your neighbor as yourself." That's the way we set things right, by loving one another as we love ourselves. Caring for others. Sharing what we have. Not lifting others up because they are rich or shoving them down because they are poor. Showing love and concern for all people regardless of what they do for a living, what they do in their free time, how they behave.

Jesus said to love your neighbor and your enemies, and for a lot of the folks He preached to, their neighbors were in fact enemies, Romans – pagans who believed in the survival of the fittest, who saw mercy as weakness, who had no problems with many practices God tells us are sexually immoral. Jesus never said to condone what they do, but to love them. It was Christians caring for one another despite differences in wealth, differences in worldly status, differences in education and everything else, that attracted Romans to the church and helped them to believe that Jesus could be their savior too.

But is this such a big deal? Does showing favoritism really add up to so much? Yes, James says. If you judge the poor, ignore the poor, insult the poor, favor the rich – you are sinning. You are breaking the law. James anticipated his hearers thinking that this was petty; they needed benefactors, people to keep things afloat; so what if we pay them special attention? James says, it doesn't matter what part of the law you've broken to be a lawbreaker. If you kill, even if you haven't committed adultery, you are a lawbreaker. You haven't done either of those things but you show favoritism and deny the poor their due – you're a lawbreaker. There are certainly degrees of sin, different consequences for the severity of the sin, but for the Christian, all sin is a problem because it breaks faith with God and damages our relationship with Him.

What is the solution, then? Because many in James' audience know they're guilty of this, at least in the past. "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"

We have two choices. We can be judged under the old law of Israel, the law that set no one free, the law that condemns us. Paul says that as soon as we come under that law, we die because as soon as we see it, we want to break it, and do. "The good I want to do I do not do," Paul said of the old law. Or we can be judged under the law of freedom, the law of Christ, where all our sins are forgiven.

True Christians, we who are believers, are under the law of freedom. But what is it about our actions that shows that we are under that law? Mercy. Faithful Christians show mercy to others because we have been shown mercy, because we know we are not judged for all our sins. Mercy triumphs over judgment. Mercy has the victory. Mercy is the way we live.

Favoritism is not just a form of judgment, James is saying. It is withholding mercy. Do we love our neighbors as ourselves or not? Because that's the royal law, the law that holds Christians accountable. If we love our neighbors as ourselves, we treat them with honor and respect no matter their station in life. We make certain they have what they need for life. We care about them in tangible ways, even if it means we have less.

Mercy will be shown to the merciful, who live in ways that show their faith in Christ. There are countless ways to be merciful to others, right? Could be food and help to the poor, of course. Plenty of ways to help there through a lot of different services. Could be giving of your funds or your time. Might be checking in with friends during this strange season and sharing your love for them. Any number of ways you can show mercy.

And in these days when everyone is fed up and tired, not sure what to do next, frustrated over the job market and elections and masks and what not, show grace. Whether it's to the guy on the phone straightening out a messed-up order or the teacher trying to prepare for a classroom that looks like something out of a sci-fi science lab, be kind. When tempers are short, remember what we learned last week, which is another way to show mercy – be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.

Friends, we will get this wrong often. Times like these are trying. And yet that's why we need mercy all the more. Not just to the poor, though they need it more than most. Mercy to everyone, just like you want to be shown mercy. May we live as Christ lived, showing compassion not on those who deserved it but on all who would receive it.