

James 2:1-13

I. Judge Rightly (1-11)

A. Do not judge with prejudice (1-7)

1. Do not prejudicially judge between the rich and poor (1-4)

- a Don't let your faith in Jesus – our Lord of Glory – be influenced by prejudicial judgment/partiality (1)

Faith in Jesus is incompatible with favoritism/prejudice (which is injustice/unrighteousness)

- b Example: Treating the rich and poor differently (2-4)

- 1) Condition: If you treat the rich and poor this way (2-3)

- a) You look on the rich with special (unjust) favor (2-3a)

- (1) The Situation: A rich person and a poor person enter your assembly (2)

- (a) Rich man: A man enters your assembly wearing a gold ring and splendid/glamorous/ostentatious/bright [clean] clothing (2a)

- (b) Poor man: but also a poor man [enters] with filthy clothing (2b)

- (2) Your Response: You pay attention to/give favor to the one with the glamorous clothing (3a)

You give more attention to the one who is higher in your own standard of values. You judge the two based solely on their clothes and the assumed underlying economic status. The implication is that you selfishly calculate those factors in others which show signs of how much benefit they may be to you. James was written to a culture characterized by reciprocity “trading favors” as a standard of social conduct. It was normal to give benefit to someone in the expectation that they would benefit you in return. And to not return benefit was socially unacceptable. Therefore James seems to be saying “You calculate that the rich man may benefit you with his money, so you pay more attention to him than to the poor man, who shows no sign of being able to benefit you.”

- b) Result: You respond to each group in an unjust manner (3b-f)

- (1) To the rich man (3b-c)

- (a) You say: (3b)

- (b) “you sit here in the good place/place of honor” (3c)

By giving him the place of honor, you show that you judge him worthy of this honor (or you are a calculating hypocrite)

- (2) To the poor man (3d-f)

- (a) You say: (3d)

- (b) What you say: (3e-f)

- (i) “you stand there” (3e)

- (ii) or “you sit under my footstool” (3f)

By giving him the place of dishonor, you show that you judge him unworthy of honor, and so look down on one created in the image of God.

- 2) Effect: You have made a preference in yourselves and are judges with evil thoughts (4)

- a) You make a distinction among/waver within yourselves (4a)

This is stated as a rhetorical question, but the force is a statement, assuming an affirmative answer

There are two possible translations here:

1. “you are wavering, you are at odds with yourself, you are double minded” – That is “you are combining your faith with a prejudice that is not appropriate, you are trying to hold together contradictory, mutually exclusive realities.” This meaning fits with the use of διακρινομαι in 1:6 and James calling the readers “double minded” in 4:8.

“The instability mentioned suggests a person who is divided in his or her loyalties to God and the world. While faith means an unwavering trust in God,... doubt implies that the professed believer trusts in riches for security....The double-minded Christian is the one who fails to love and obey God wholeheartedly. Such a mind is characterized by doubts which are typical of those who lack authentic faith. A divided mind is evidenced by the different treatment meted out to visitors, especially along lines of social class.” WBC en loc.

“If you pay special honour to the rich, you are torn between the standards of the world and the standards of God and you can’t make up your mind which you are going to apply” Barclay en loc (though he argues for the 2nd meaning)

2. “you are making a distinction, you are discriminating, you are making a judgment” – That is “you are considering one person more valuable than the other.” This meaning fits best the context of the next proposition which talks about them being judges

“You are guilty of making class distinctions which in the Christian fellowship should not exist” Barclay en loc

- b) And you become judges with evil/corrupt/worthless thoughts/reasonings (4b)

The emphasis here is probably not just the fact that they are making a distinction/judging (though that is important), but the way they are judging – with evil/corrupt/worthless thoughts/reasonings – “judges characterized by evil/corrupt/worthless thoughts/reasonings” which fits well with the context of the next verses in which God’s standard of judgment is contrasted

As highlighted above, these corrupt reasonings are usually driven by selfish motives, and justice is skewed toward the conclusion that we think will most benefit ourselves

2. Reason: God’s judgment standards of rich and poor are different than yours (5-7)

- a Challenge to hear God’s verdict: My beloved brothers, listen (5a)

- b The content of God’s verdict and its implications (5b-7)

- 1) Regarding the poor (5b-6a)

- a) God’s verdict: God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom which He promised to those who love Him (5b)

- b) The readers’ contradictory response: But you have dishonored the poor (6a)

- 2) Regarding the rich (6b-7)

- a) The rich cause you hardship (6b-c)

- (1) They oppress/dominate you (6b)

- (2) They drag you into court/judgment (6c)

- b) The rich blaspheme the good Name [Christian] which is called over you (7)

Your verdict does not match God’s verdict because your motivations are different (selfish) and your method is different (man looks on the outside, but God looks at the heart). Remember

that when God became incarnate, He did not come as a rich and powerful ruler, but the King of the universe took on the nature of a slave, being obedient even to death (Phil. 2:1-11).

B. Reason: Judging with prejudice shows you to be a hypocrite & lawbreaker (8-11)

1. If you love your neighbor, you do good (8)

a Condition: If you fulfill the law by loving your neighbor (8a-c)

1) If you fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture (8a)

2) The Scripture quote – quoting Lev. 19:18 (8b-c)

a) You will love the neighbor (8b)

b) As [you love] yourself (8c)

b Effect: you do well/good (8d)

To fulfill this law would be the opposite of showing the prejudice that James warns against.

2. But if you show partiality, you sin, and are rebuked by the law as a lawbreaker (9-11)

a If you show partiality, you sin and are rebuked as a lawbreaker (9)

1) Condition: If you show partiality (9a)

2) Effect (9b-d)

a) You do sin (lit. “work sin”) (9b)

b) The Result: You are rebuked as a lawbreaker (9c-d)

(1) You are rebuked by the law (9c)

(2) As a lawbreaker [is rebuked (because you are a lawbreaker)] (9d)

Prohibition of favoritism in judging is part of God’s revealed law (e.g. Lev. 19:15) and is to be avoided as much as murder and adultery

b Reason/Explanation (10-11)

1) Whoever keeps every law but one is still a lawbreaker (10)

a) Condition: (10a-b)

(1) Whoever keeps the entire law (10a)

(2) Yet stumbles/fails in only one (10b)

b) Result: he has become guilty/liable of them all (10c)

2) Explanation/Illustration (11)

a) Scripture/God says more than one command (11a-b)

(1) The one Who says “Do not commit adultery” (11a)

(2) He also says “Do not murder” (11b)

b) The Implication: (11c-e)

(1) If you break one, even if you keep others (11c-d)

(a) Even though you do not commit adultery (11c)

(b) If you commit murder (11d)

(2) You have become a violator/transgressor of the law (11e)

Unless we are perfect in our obedience to God (which excludes everyone but Jesus) we have no grounds to look down on others in self-righteous condemnation

II. Judge as those who will be judged (12-13)

A. Speak and Act as those who are about to be judged (12)

1. Speak and act in this way (12a-b)

a Speak this way (12a)

b And Act/do things this way (12b)

2. As those who are about to be judged by means of the law of freedom (12c)

The “royal law” of v. 8 is also a “law of freedom”(cf. 1:25) because the King of the law is both just and merciful. Those who have faith in Christ will not be judged strictly based on full compliance to the standards of God. If that were the case, there is no hope for any of us. Rather, God made a way to perfectly fulfill justice and yet still be merciful to us who deserve no mercy. God is just AND gracious toward us, and this realization should make a difference in the way that we speak and act toward others. We are told to take the log out of our own eye before we attempt to take the speck out of our neighbor’s eye.

B. The Reason: (13)

1. Judgment without mercy will be given to the one who does not exercise mercy (13a)

cf. Matt 5:7, 6:12, 7:1-2; 18:15-35

There is an important distinction between making right judgments (good evaluations and decisions, even involving whether other people are to be liked and trusted) on the one hand and standing in judgment (self-righteously condemning or writing off a person as valueless) on the other hand. All Christians are called to be discerning judges in many contexts in our daily lives. However, only those with the given responsibility, proper authority, and demonstrated ability (not blinded by logs) should act as jury (pronouncing verdict) and executioner (carrying out the sentence).

2. Mercy is more powerful than judgment (13b)

cf. Matt 12:7; Rom 3:25-26, 2 Sam 14:14

We should strive to make good judgments. But what we do with our conclusion is equally important. We can be honest and correct in concluding that a person has a speck in their eye. But instead of condemning them for their speck, we can help them remove it. We should imitate the character of Christ, who did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. Yes, God is just and will always remain so. But He also made a way so that His grace has the last word. He loved His enemies, and He has commanded us to do likewise. He has also enabled us to do so, by transforming us by His Spirit because of His love shown to us when we did not deserve it.