

J

ames

The Book of

Session Five:
October 18, 2004

James 2:1-7—Faith and Favoritism

❖The Text (NRSV)

2:1 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

❖What's going on here?

-v.1—Chapter 1 ended with a call to care for the defenseless and those in need, and James continues here with further attention to the plight of the poor. In both sections (1:26-27 and 2:1-7), James grounds Christians' action in the character of God, who has known in the Old Testament as the defender of the orphan and the widow, and who, as James points out here, has "chosen the poor in the world" to inherit the kingdom.

2:1 also pulls no punches. James questions whether shows of favoritism and discrimination are at all compatible with belief in Jesus. This is the only explicit reference to Jesus Christ after the book's opening in 1:1. The particulars of Jesus' identity (both as someone who himself cared for the poor and as one who came not in flashy clothes but in commonness and poverty) make a claim on *our* identity as Jesus' followers.

This verse also reminds us that faith—for James and for *all* the New Testament writers—is not restricted to beliefs *about* God, but rather is a trust *in* God that reorients a person's whole life and changes our relationships. Therefore, to really have faith in Jesus means allowing who Jesus is to shape who we are. To be sure, other New Testament books are quick to remind us that even faith is a gift (see Eph. 2:8-9 especially). James, however, is not asking "How do I get faith in the first place?" but rather, "What does my faith mean for how I treat people?"

-v.2-4—James fleshes out what he means by favoritism by giving a concrete example with a human face. It is quite possible that James is addressing a real problem in his congregation, or at least that real actions of discrimination were happening within the recipient congregation.

That said, scholars are not certain about what the exact real-life situations is that James is describing. There are two major possibilities:

- (1) Members of the congregation are showing preference for the rich as the assembly gathers for *worship* and are making the poor feel unwelcome
- (2) The Christian assembly is serving as a sort of court to *settle disputes* within the community, and the congregation is unfairly favoring the wealthy, more influential disputants at the expense of giving the poor a just hearing. This setting is at least a good possibility, since the Christian assembly grew out of the Jewish synagogue, which did serve as a place to resolve some civil disputes.

In any case, the situation is serious—this is more than a mere inconvenience to the poor people who are affected, and the issue is more than welcoming everyone to church with a smile. For James this is both a matter of justice and of genuine love for neighbor. Moreover, the "distinctions" they have made deny the unity they are supposed to have as

believers in “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.”

-v.5—This is intended as a rhetorical question, expecting us to agree that God has indeed *chosen* the poor—but we might question this assumption. So what does James mean about God choosing the poor? Well, one thing it *doesn't* seem to mean is that there is some maximum allowable income to be able to follow Jesus. Surely, there are greedy poor people, and there are wealthy but selfless people who use their money for the good of others. But we've already seen that James, like Jesus is well aware that wealth has a tremendous, seductive power to make us love *it* and trust in *ourselves* rather than trusting *God* and loving our *neighbors*.

Here in v.5, James connects these “chosen poor” with those who love God—he has in mind those people who are able to trust and love God *because of* (or even *in spite of*) the fact that they have no wealth or power to become an idol for them. He seems to be tapping into the long Old Testament tradition of God choosing to work through and show special favor to such trusting weak and poor ones—Hannah, Ruth, Naomi, the young David, the widow to whom Elijah came, and for that matter, the whole nation of freed slaves known as Israel. If this is how God works, surely the *people* of God ought to have a special love and concern for those without power or wealth.

It is also helpful to remember that James is not addressing the *salvation* of the rich and poor, but rather how Christians are to regard these groups now. James clearly has a sense of a coming future kingdom, but he is concerned especially with the “now” question of living out our identity as God's people. This is very similar to Jesus' teaching in Luke 14:12-14 about inviting those who cannot repay you to the banquets you host—for Jesus (and for James!) this is how to embody the character of the God who has given us birth.

-v.6-7—James just gave the character of God as a reason to show concern for the poor. Now he gives a practical reason: it makes no sense for his audience to curry favor with the very ones who are stepping on them through the legal system and through economic means.

The “excellent” name referred to in v.7 may be a reference to baptism and the name of Jesus (or of God more broadly) invoke over the ones baptized. Within Judaism and Christianity, to be a part of God's people meant that one both belonged to God and was stamped, as it were, with God's name as a mark of that belonging. We don't know in what form this “blaspheming” of God's name came (the empire-wide persecution of Christians would not come until later in history), but James uses it to illustrate the contrast between the poor ones who love God (v.5) and these rich ones who show that they do not by effectively slandering God's name.

Connections: Playing Favorites

- What are ways we still practice and experience favoritism in the church? How do we still discriminate along the lines of rich and poor? What are other lines and categories we use?
- What can you, as an individual, do to break those cycles of partiality?
- Why do you think James' audience—and Christians today—show special favor to some? Is James asking us to like everyone in our congregation? What would he suggest I do to relate to those people whom I don't especially like?
- What does James' concern for the poor say about what he believes about God?
- When you read these verses, with whom do you identify the most? The poor person in dirty clothes? The person with jewelry and expensive clothes? Someone in between? How does that affect how you make sense of this passage?

James 2:8-13—Letting the Law Keep Us❖ **The Text (NRSV)**

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹For the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

❖ **What’s going on here?**

-v.8—James gives a summary of the law here that echoes Jesus’ own answer about the greatest commandments: love for God (1:12, 2:5) and here, love for neighbor as self. This is James’ alternative to the self-interested partiality he condemns in 2:1-7. Rather than playing by the old rules of you-scratch-my-back-and-I’ll-scratch-yours and getting in good with the haves while leaving the have-nots to their own devices, James says we *really* glimpse God’s design of the good life when we love our neighbors freely.

It’s also worth noting that James calls this central commandment a statement of the “royal law.” In the Greek, the connection is clearer, but even in English, we can see a relationship between “kingdom” (2:5) and “royal”—both come from the language world of royalty and rulers, and both evoke God’s Reign. In other words, this isn’t just a rule for the sake of having a rule to follow—to truly love one’s neighbor is to embody God’s Kingdom now. And once again, as a firstfruits people (1:18), we are enabled to live out God’s Reign now even as we wait for it to come.

-v.9-11—James’ final argument against the discrimination mentioned in 2:1-7 is that it violates the

“royal” law, the law that characterizes people who live with God as their sovereign. Again, the Jewish character of James and his congregation is clear—unlike Paul writing to Gentile Christians (who heard “law” talk as a new set of rules to “get in” to heaven), James sees the law (the Torah) as a gift that he desires to keep in its fullness as a way of life.

Like Paul, however, James keeps with the thinking of 1st-century Judaism that the law has an integrity to it; in other words, to break the law at one point is to break the entire law. Paul uses this idea (see especially Romans 2:21-23) to show how Jews along with Gentiles are all under the power of sin—no one has a right to boast before God or stand in judgment over another. (And from there, Paul offers the promise of the gospel “apart from the law.”)

James makes a different move, although he is still speaking against people wrongly exercising judgment over others. For James the idea that the law is to be kept in its entirety means that it’s not up to us to pick and choose which of God’s commands we like or don’t like. The law was given as a means to have a coherent and holistic way of life—to break even a part of it is to violate the integrity of that way of life. James uses broad brush strokes with examples from the Ten Commandments, but his point is still to drive his readers to see their shows of partiality as the sin and law-breaking that they are. But again, the point for James isn’t to threaten us with punishment for violating the law; rather, he wants us to see how partiality (toward the rich here), since it is a violation of God’s commandment and instruction to us, fractures the whole way of life that God desires for us. In fact, even if it seems like a minor offense, this kind of partiality is as serious and detrimental to the community as adultery or murder.

-v.12—Again, James describes God’s instruction (Torah) as a “law of liberty” (see 1:25). This helps us understand James not as a rigid legalist but as someone who sees in God’s design for human

community the gift of true freedom. He is not obsessed with the keeping of minute rules as a way to earn our place before God (note that James doesn't breathe a word about observing Jewish rituals like circumcision or dietary laws). Rather, James wants us to let God's instruction *keep us*—that is, to let God's design for us so shape and inform us that we are come to act and live in God's Reign freely. The idea is similar to a saying of St. Augustine, who put it like this: "Love God, and then do as you please." The point is not that if we love God, we store up points so we can do bad things later, or that if we love God, it doesn't matter how we act. Rather, by loving God, our desires and our wants are shaped in accordance with our love for God so that we will come to delight in what God wants for us.

-v.13—This verse has both the strongest statement of law in it and the strongest statement of grace in it, all at once. On the one hand, the first half really sounds like we earn our rewards (good or bad) from God. Jesus has similar thoughts on showing mercy in Matthew (cf. Matt. 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.") James seems only to be giving the flip-side of this beatitude, that when we become judges over others (James 2:4) and do not have compassion, we cannot expect compassion in return.

The logic of this argument sounds very works-oriented: *if you're good, then God will be good to you, and vice versa.* And while good Lutherans are often uncomfortable to say the least with this kind of thinking, we should remember James' context and that he is not addressing questions of how to "get in" but how to live once you're already "in." Writing to a Jewish Christian audience, James is echoing the mindset of the Old Testament prophets. When Israel became complacent and forgot to live as a holy people who practiced justice and mercy, the prophets spoke judgment to them to *bring them back*. Similarly, James' audience already has a sense of being the chosen

people of God (the "first fruits"), and James wants to make it clear that it does not mean they can have a sense of entitlement as a result. They have no excuse before God, nor are they intrinsically "better" than other people—rather, their "specialness" lies in the fact that they are called to be a people who show mercy and who live justly.

So far, James has just been working out the logic of his train of thought. If you break the law by judging others with "evil thoughts," you become accountable for the whole law and will be judged as such. This is the thinking of the first half of 2:13. But then comes the second half: "mercy triumphs over judgment." It's hard to say what exactly he means—is it that my acts of mercy outweigh the force of my judgments of others? Is it that being merciful trumps the condemnation of the law against me? Is it that God's mercy is stronger than God's need to judge me? Is it that for whatever right God has to judge us and find us wanting, grace is yet there and speaks on our behalf?

I'm not sure that James even knows what to do with what he has said. His logical argument has been going along so smoothly and leads him to conclude that the merciless will be judged mercilessly. And yet, maybe after reflecting on all the times in Israel's history when God's forgiveness and faithfulness were still there after God's acts of judgment, (or maybe, even more speculatively, after reflecting on his own rejection of his Brother before Easter and then his later coming to find grace in the risen Lord Jesus), James blurts out that mercy triumphs over judgment. He doesn't quite know what to do with that fact, and he doesn't know how to reconcile it with the logic of judgment. Surely, God reserves the right to judge us, and God promises that at the last everything in the whole universe will be set right, with wrongs righted and justice finally done. (It's important to notice that James says mercy triumphs over *judgment*, not *justice*, as though mercy and justice were ultimately opposed to one another.) But

(and James doesn't seem to know quite what to do with this divine "but") James also knows from the character of God that mercy triumphs over judgment. And he just leaves those two trains of thought, as seemingly contradictory as they are, right up next to each other and unresolved.

Connections: The Challenge of Neighbor Love

-Jesus says that after loving God wholly, loving our neighbors as we love ourselves is the most important commandment. James calls it the "royal law"—the rule of life for belonging to the kingdom of God. So what does it mean? Is love the same as liking someone? What does love for your neighbor look like?

-How is love the same or different from "niceness"? When your neighbor is doing something unhealthy or harmful to others, what form does love take?

-Why do you think it is so important for Jesus and for James that we love our neighbors? What's the point of all of this neighbor-love? Is it a way to earn something for ourselves? If so, is it really love? What do you think?

❖ Themes

-judgment—At the heart of James' discussion of judgment is not an abstract question about what God is like but rather a practical question of how we are to live within the design (wisdom) and reign of God. The recurring talk of judgment, especially in 2:12-13, cannot be separated from the context of 2:1-11, where James is taking to task those people who have failed to show mercy for the poor and instead have become (unjust) "judges with evil thoughts." It seems that what really gets his goat is the arrogance of people who insist that they are keeping the law but are actually violating its integrity by showing partiality. His threat about judgment without mercy is especially intended to expose the hypocrisy of those in his audience who pretend to be able to judge others while they themselves refuse to recognize their own breaking of God's way of life.

At the same time, when we hear James announce in 2:12-13 that we are to "act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty" and that "judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy," the Lutherans in the room begin to squirm. At this point, James comes *very* close to saying that we earn mercy from God based on what we do. But before we dismiss James as being too works-oriented, we need to listen (and deal with) very similar words on the lips of Jesus. He says in Mark 4:24 that "the measure you give will be the measure you get" and in Matthew 7:2 that "with the judgment you make you will be judged." Are both Jesus and James in need of a catechism refresher course in the undeservedness of grace?

Well, one possibility is that the point of both is that we have no *right* to expect mercy if we ourselves are not merciful. Both Jesus and James seem intent on exposing our hypocrisy when we judge others (and in James' case, judges "with evil thoughts" who show favoritism) and then expect to be exempt from God's judgment.

But we also need to take an honest look at the reality of divine judgment in our own tradition. Even Paul, in his grace-filled epistle to the Romans, baldly asserts that God "will repay according to each one's deeds" with eternal life for those who do good and fury and wrath for those who do wickedness. And even as we say the Creed each week, we affirm that Jesus will come "to judge the living and the dead." How do we make sense of that alongside our belief in the God who justifies us freely by grace, apart from our works? James doesn't ask that question, so perhaps the best we can do is to hear other voices of Scripture (like Paul's) tell us that God both reserves the right to judge us according to our actions (including the ways we hypocritically judge others) and yet also reserves the right to love us anyway, even if we don't know *how* that is worked out precisely. Maybe that's why James leaves it with the simple sentence, "mercy triumphs over judgment" and stops there in a humble and holy silence.