

RUF Large Group Bible Study  
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James 1:26-2:13<sup>2</sup>

James 1:26 - 2:13 26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. ESV James 2:1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? 8 If you really fulfill 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 but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 11 For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

As we've moved through James, we've been seeing how he has written a most practical book, one that calls us to do things differently. And that will only continue. However, we've also seen that James always roots our doing into our being. He says that we should act differently because we *think* and *are* different. That is something we can't forget. Something we must continually remember for we are all naturally works-oriented, wanting to believe that we lose, gain and keep status by what we do.

This week James starts in with his three themes that demonstrate true Christianity. He said that we must bridle our tongues, help the poor and downcast and keep ourselves pure. He first tackles helping the poor, so we will too. We're going to look at the outward problem, the inward problem and then the solution to the problem.

### ***The Outward Problem***

James has two outward problems in mind here. Both deal with our interaction with the poor and with the law.

After an opening statement in 2:1, which we'll come back to, he starkly goes straight into a story; it's obvious enough that we don't have to spend much time explaining it. A "gold-fingered man" (very James Bondian) walks in and a shabbily-dressed man walks in and the ushers give the rich man a good seat while scooting the poor man off to the side. (This is one of the few texts (the only text?) that give instruction to ushers). James says that this is bad policy because they are making distinctions and becoming judges with evil thoughts. Then he goes into his reasons, which get to the inward problem so we'll hold off on them.

The Greek word προσωποληψίας, is plural, meaning *partialities*, which shows us that that this one case study that follows is just an example of the wider problem. This word is a New Testament neologism, it means literally, "to lift up the face." "The sin of partiality is the sin of judging based on accidentals and externals and, as James noted, it always bears down on the poor and disadvantaged."<sup>3</sup> James is telling us that we should not judge people merely on external appearances, on the face of things. James isn't saying that we shouldn't make *any* distinctions; we should still honor and defer to the elderly and people whose positions command our respect.<sup>4</sup>

Now, it's interesting that here at the university we sit in a place that actually agrees with this and would likewise call this a sin. It is against official policy to offer or deny services based on race, gender, sexuality, disability, economic status and all sorts of other distinctions. So we all nod our heads at this, felling pretty good about ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Resources used: Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982; Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000; John MacArthur, *James*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1998; Dr. Tim Keller's sermons on James found at [www.redeemer.com](http://www.redeemer.com); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Doubleday: New York, 1995; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New Interpreter's Bible), Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1998; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, Intervarsity Press: Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Motyer, p. 82

<sup>4</sup> "It would not be showing partiality, for example, to offer the last remaining seat to an elderly person and to simultaneously invite a younger person to stand or sit of the floor. The elderly command respect and considerate attention (Lev. 19:32). Or again, were Her Majesty the Queen or the President of our country to come to worship, we would consider it both right and indeed our privilege to stand when they entered and to have the best seat held in readiness. Again, we would be obeying Scripture (Pr. 24:21, 1 Pet. 2:17). But it is one thing thus to acknowledge inherent dignity, whether of age or position; it is another thing altogether to be swayed by the mere chance that one possesses worldly advantages such as money and the other does not." Motyer, p. 82

However, don't be so sure. No you may not be a racist, and probably never would admit it if you were anyway, but when you walk into a room, how do you decide whom to talk to? Whom to sit by? Who are your friends? I would bet that your friends pretty much look like and even dress like you do. We may not officially separate ourselves by race, but we often subtly do on style or clothes or cool-factor or any number of things. The races mostly sit together in the Union. Regulating the heart is an entirely different matter than any sort of non-discriminating statement posted on a document.

James says that this is wrong, wrong, wrong. He gets at its wrongness by pointing us to the law, which is the second outward problem that we have, though it's connected to the first. He is making an argument to say that showing partiality is not okay, just as committing adultery or murder is not okay. You cannot take pride in keeping some of the law while breaking other parts. It's not fine to create a hierarchy of the law and then keep the things you want and forgo the things that you don't like as well. But many of us think of God's law like this. Like it's a pile of stones; taking one or two away doesn't affect the pile too much. James says that the law is more like a pane of glass. You can't crack it or take any away without damaging the integrity of the whole thing. It's a piece, not pieces.

"The contrast here, then, is between 'really' keeping the law of love (2:8) and the mere pretense of doing so while, in fact, disobeying one of its provisions. This would be the same as claiming that one kept the ten commandments if one avoided adultery... even while one committed murder (2:11)!"<sup>5</sup>

He brings this out by saying that what is wrong with making distinctions among people is that it breaks the essence of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," or "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you were dying of hunger, I'd bet you'd do anything to get out of that situation. If you were lacking shelter, you'd be really worried about that wouldn't you? But we just simply don't care, since we are fine. We're breaking this commandment, and thus breaking the law:

**Deuteronomy 10:17-19** <sup>17</sup> For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. <sup>18</sup> He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. <sup>19</sup> Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

**Leviticus 19:15-18** <sup>15</sup> "You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. <sup>16</sup> You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. <sup>17</sup> "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. <sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Let's make application to this outward problem for a minute. James is saying that God does something that we should do. He has *chosen* those who are poor. The word *chosen* there means "deliberately gone after." When a homeless person comes up to us and we dig out a quarter that isn't a picture of this. That is the poor coming after us. James says that we should go after them to help, because they have dignity and worth. <sup>6</sup>

As we approach the height of the election fervor, it might be good for me to touch on this in the political realm. Social conservatives want to concentrate on personal morality and often don't ever get around to doing much about social morality. They are all over Do not commit adultery and Do not murder and prayer in school and the marriage amendment (and rightly so), but they are getting richer and richer and never seem to get around to spreading that money around to help others. They are committing scads of white collar crimes (see: Enron), using labor without paying a decent wage (see: Nike) and using the rules of business to make themselves richer (see: Trump declaring bankruptcy over and over again).

Social liberals tend to want to concentrate on social morality and they're more than happy to let you do whatever you want with your personal morality. They want to create programs and welfare and social institutions to guarantee that people eat, but they never seem to be able to get people out of those institutions. They also never deal with these people in a level of responsibility and respect. They commute in from the suburbs and work and then leave. They go home and disassociate their concern for the poor from their concern for the unborn or the chaste or the married.

God is telling us through James that we need to have a personal morality *and* a social morality. That we must live with integrity in all walks of life.

Another point: secular humanism often wants to help the poor. However, they have a real problem and that is that this helping contradicts what they think about life. If you believe in evolution, then what you are saying is that each person is just a bunch of chemicals and "stuff." If you believe that, then you are no more valuable than a rock or an animal or even a virus. And if you believe that, if you go with the survival of the fittest, then you shouldn't have any problem with people dying off who can't handle life.

But if you are a Christian you don't think that. You think that every person has been created by God and even still bears the image of God in him or her. So, if the secular humanist helps a person and the Christian doesn't, then what does that say about us? It says that we are equally as contradictory to our stated belief, and that is sad and wrong, says James. Act like who you are.

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, p. 236

<sup>6</sup> Thought from Keller

Still further, if you look at a map, you will see a very definite correlation between the poorest countries and the growth of religion, the richest countries and the decline in religion. Not only that, but if you looked within our own country you'll see the same thing on a personal demographic level. There's something about the richer you get the less likely you are to be a Christian, or at least a vital, growing passionate Christian. Think about that as you pursue wealth.

James causes us to look at ourselves. Why we do or don't want to be involved with the Habitat Shackathon? Why we do or don't give money to street people. Why we do or don't have a kid we support with Compassion or some other agency (The Rainbow Network). Why we do or don't sit next to people with weird clothes or bad skin or no style or strange habits. Why our faith does or doesn't ever touch on these decisions.

### ***The Inward Problem***

James though drives us further when he writes, "*have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*"

He makes us deal with the real issue. It's evidenced by our actions, but is rooted in our thinking, in our beliefs. All actions come from our beliefs, so that shouldn't be so surprising. What is really going on here? What is the inner problem?

I think we all want glory, to be well thought of, to not be meaningless. The word *glory* means in the Hebrew (qavod) "weight." When we receive glory, we receive weight, or substance (not necessarily pounds!). We all want to be given weight and one of our biggest fears is to be considered meaningless. Since all of us are a little unsure about where we stand in relation to this, we try to accrue glory from other things. I'm convinced that none of can gain this glory or weight from within, so we are all seeking it from an outside source.

We get weight/glory by our position on the pecking order. I've been watching seven-to-ten year old boys and it's amazing how they just naturally sort themselves out based on whatever is important at the moment. Within thirty minutes, they'll know who the best soccer player is, the best Xbox player, the fastest runner, the one with the most Bionicles – whatever it takes. And to be honest, a room full of forty year old business men isn't that much different.

We do this by our clothes. By our grades and majors. By our dating status. By the letters (often Greek) on our shirts. By our football team. By our travel plans. By our ski resort. By our high school. By our wheels. By how big our engagement ring is. Anything – just give me some glory!

But why do we do this? Are we really worth anything anyway? That depends on your answer to what we talked about earlier. Compare the glory of a person and a mountain if they are both a pile of chemicals like the secular person believes. Which is worth more? A person is worth more than a mosquito, but that's because there are more chemicals and raw material there. But not more than a mountain, right? A mountain is bigger and far more permanent. The glory of Pikes Peak would far outweigh that of a person.

But if you are a believer, you have a different perspective. You believe that a person is worth far more than a mountain. A person is something different – something unique that doesn't boil down to mere biology. There is the image of God in there and that's worth something *no matter what*.

If we believe this as people, then we must be very careful that we don't do too things. That we don't try to accrue our status and glory from things that won't actually give it to us, and that we don't rank people in a way that uses the wrong calibration system.

We must think. We must believe. We must confess that we tend to want to make these distinctions, to get glory from something else. None of us want to be inconsequential. Rocky said to Adrian when she was asking why he wanted to fight, that he just wanted to prove that he wasn't a bum. The Bible says that none of us are meaningless. We all have inherent worth, and if we are Christians that we are His children, heirs to the Kingdom, beloved of God. That gives us worth and meaning. That should make anything else absolutely secondary.

And the Bible says that this is true for everyone. That our ranking systems are flawed, useless and harmful. That when we make distinctions in this way, we aren't thinking correctly and are messing up our hearts.

So how can we fix it?

How can we fix our hearts so that we can solve the inward problem of creating worth and meaning in the wrong places and the outward problem of actually helping people in need because we love them?

### ***The Solution***

You might have missed it. I would have. James writes this in 2:1 "*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*"

It's easy to miss because this seems like such a do/don't do section. But James doesn't say that the solution to the problems is "Stop it." It's more like he says, "What were you thinking?" Have you asked someone that after they did something just crazy. I did just last week when a buddy of mine broke up with his girlfriend in what I would call a terrible decision. But that was the question – "What were you thinking?" There is a connection between thinking and doing!!

And here it is: Jesus' glory.

First, James is attributing to Jesus the splendor that is due God alone. That is tremendous. Remember that this is really abnormal. People don't call other people God with any credibility. Yet here is James claiming that his brother is God, a particularly difficult thing for a long-time Jew to ever even consider doing if it weren't true.

And when we think of Jesus' glory, we also have to think of how that was displayed to us. The Bible says that there is no greater love than one man give up his life for another. If someone has glory, weight, distinction, honor and he or she gives it up for someone else that doesn't even deserve it, that that is something absolutely incredible. And that is just what Jesus did, to the greatest extent possible. He gave up *everything*, all of his glory, in order to give us his glory. Isn't that amazing? Doesn't that affect you?

It should because James connects that thought to this one: *Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?*

God chose the poor. This means first of all the economically poor. The poor seem to get God, understand and want Christianity because it is something real, tangible, with hope and promise. We've mentioned this before, but will again. The poor get poverty, depravity, sinfulness and brokenness. They get it because they live in it. They're not isolated from it. So when someone comes and says, "You are a broken, sinful, living in a bad place," they believe it because it's obvious to them. When someone says that to someone in the suburbs who drives an Escalade and goes to university, it's not quite as real of a concept unfortunately, although it is still true.

God comes to the poor; he has a particular heart for the downtrodden. That means that you have to realize your poverty in order to accept him. This is counterintuitive to what we talked about before. We want to gain and achieve our own glory. You might accept that some things are done to you, but you'll hold on to your brains and your achievements. Your situation was given to you by God, so even that is not of your own.

You have to be poor in heart, meek, to inherit the kingdom of God. You have to be a baby, born again, to have life. You have to lose your life to gain it. The last will be first. To the poor are given the riches of heaven. "James reminds his readers of the basic principle of their existence: God's paradoxical and surprising choice."<sup>7</sup> "In the light of James' overall conception, the "world's" measurement of value is directly opposed to God's."<sup>8</sup>

What I'm saying is that you have to accept that *everything* has been given to you by God. That any glory you have, any weight or status that you have achieved – all of it – has been given to you. That your riches are his riches. That you are in fact poor and that it could all vanish in an instant.

This is the solution. To look to Christ and his glory so that yours all but vanishes. All the other ways you get glory are nothing in comparison. Some of you have been to Turner Falls in southern Oklahoma. There's a nice little stream with a nice little waterfall feeding it. My kids think it's tremendous. I think it's pitiful. Why? Because I've been to Niagra Falls. I've seen the real glory of a waterfall. Thus, while I can appreciate this one, I can't give it any more status than it deserves. If you've seen the real Van Gogh, the picture in the book just isn't the same. When you've heard Beethoven's Fifth live by a great orchestra, then a recording just won't do. We still appreciate them, but we've seen the real glory.

When we look at Jesus and his glory, our measly attempts at glory should be put in perspective. Our weight giving to status should fade away and we are able to help others as God has helped us. We are energized to pursue the lost and poor as God has pursued us. We didn't deserve and yet still received mercy, so we want to give mercy to others.

I've reserved the kicker of this passage for the end. James writes, *12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

We're going to talk more about this at length in the next passage, so I'm holding myself back. Suffice it to say that Jesus says this in Matthew 7:

*17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*

*21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

*Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*

Jesus will be a fruit inspector. He says you will recognize them by their fruits. *A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.* When he looks at your fronds, what does he see? Does he see a heart that makes distinctions based on evil thoughts? Does he see favoritism? Does he see a longing for a new community?<sup>9</sup> Does he

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, p. 224

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, p. 224

<sup>9</sup> "In obedience to their king, Jesus, Christians are to build themselves a genuine counterculture, in which the values of the kingdom of God rather than the values of this world are lived out." Moo, p. 113

sacrificial giving? Does he see a concern for the poor? Does he see a heart for the lost? Does he see a concern and a view toward his glory? The fruit doesn't make the tree healthy, mind you. But a healthy tree bears fruit, the fruit of the gospel.

We must all be able to sing this song and believe it is accurately representing us:

O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing (verses five and six)

*He speaks, and listening to His voice,  
New life the dead receive  
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice  
The humble poor believe*

*Hear Him ye deaf, His praise ye dumb  
Your loosened tongues employ  
Ye blind, behold your Savior come  
And leap, ye lame, for joy*

