

The Sin of Partiality

A Sermon Essay taken from James 2:1–13

Sunday, March 8, 2026

Pleasant Valley Baptist Church

"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." James 2:1, ESV

Introduction: A Mirror We'd Rather Not Look Into

There is something uncomfortable about the book of James. He has a way of holding a mirror up to the church and refusing to let us look away. And here in chapter 2, the reflection is not particularly flattering.

The world into which James wrote was deeply stratified — divided along lines of wealth, ethnicity, and social standing. The rich held power. The poor were marginalized. Then came the gospel, and with it, an announcement so radical that the world has never quite recovered from it. Paul wrote to the Galatians: *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28). And to the Colossians: *"Christ is all, and in all"* (Colossians 3:11). Every social category the ancient world used to sort people into "valuable" and "less valuable" — Christ dismantles the whole system.

The problem, of course, is that knowing a truth and living a truth are two entirely different things. Even the apostle Peter — who had walked with the Lord, preached at Pentecost, and watched the Spirit fall on Cornelius's household — had to be confronted by God before he was willing to sit at table with a Gentile (Acts 10:34–35; Galatians 2:11–14). Old habits of the heart die hard.

James knows this. And so, with the directness that characterizes his entire letter, he addresses it head-on. What he says in James 2:1–13 is not a historical curiosity about the first-century church. It is a word to us — to every congregation that has ever let the world's measuring stick sneak in through the back door of the sanctuary.

Part One: The Sin Described — Then and Now

James paints a scene that is almost painfully easy to picture. Two men walk into the assembly. One is well-dressed — fine clothing, a gold ring. The other man is poor; his worn clothing makes that clear. The congregation responds differently to each. The wealthy man is shown a seat of honor. The poor man is told, essentially, "You can stand over there." One man's presence is welcomed. The other man's presence is merely tolerated.

James does not mince words: *"Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"* (James 2:4). Ouch! He is saying that, with this behavior, they were operating by the world's values rather than the kingdom's.

The word translated "partiality" in verse 1 is the Greek *prosōpolēmpsia* — literally, "to receive the face." To show partiality is to judge by what you see on the surface: the style of a coat, the neighborhood someone comes from, the car in the parking lot. It is the sin of letting outward appearances determine inward worth.¹

Before we congratulate ourselves that we are too sophisticated (or too spiritual) to repeat this scenario, let us be honest. Partiality has not gone away. It has simply learned to dress itself differently. It may look like this: the family that tithes generously gets the pastor's personal attention; the single mother struggling to make rent gets a handshake on the way out. The successful businessman is invited to serve on the finance committee the same month he joins. The man who comes in wearing work boots and smelling faintly of the job site is handed a bulletin and pointed toward the back — not with words, perhaps, but with body language that speaks volumes. John Stott, commenting on this very passage, observed that the church has always been tempted to mirror the social structures of its surrounding culture rather than challenge them.² That observation is as current today as it was when he wrote it.

One Sunday, a shabbily dressed and dirty fellow with an unkempt beard entered the sanctuary of a large church just as the service was about to start. Ushers noticed that he smelled dirty and had bad body odor. They cautiously welcomed him and handed him a bulletin. He then proceeded to walk all the way to front and sat down on the floor off to one side. The members were shocked. Those he walked past were repulsed by his smell. Minds reeled. Something had to be done! After a long moment, one of most respected elderly members of the church started down the aisle toward the fellow. Minds relaxed. This gentleman would handle this matter in short order. Imagine the shock of the congregation when that well-dressed, clean-cut man of eighty-plus years walked up to the man...and sat on the floor next to him and stayed with him for the entire service!

Part Two: Why This Sin Is Incompatible with Genuine Faith

James does not simply tell us to stop showing partiality. He tells us why — and his reasoning builds with purpose. Three lines of argument deserve our attention.

First, partiality contradicts the character of the Lord we claim to follow. *"Show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory"* (James 2:1). James ties the command directly to the person of Christ — the Lord of glory. That title echoes the *Shekinah* (shuh-kine-uh) presence of God in the Old Testament. James is saying: the One you worship is the Lord of Glory. Now act like it. Jesus never once showed partiality. He touched lepers, spoke to Samaritan women, called a tax collector down from a tree and invited Himself to lunch. He let a sinful woman anoint His feet while a respectable Pharisee looked on in barely concealed disgust. When we treat the wealthy visitor with warmth and the struggling family with indifference, we misrepresent the Lord we claim to follow. R. C. Sproul put it plainly: *"The glory of God...makes a claim on every dimension of our lives, including how we treat the person sitting next to us in the pew."*³

Second, it dishonors people whom God has chosen to honor. *"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?"* (James 2:5). God, who could have populated His kingdom with the powerful and prominent, has often chosen to work through the poor, the humble, and the overlooked. Paul reminded the Corinthians that *"not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth"* (1 Corinthians 1:26). That is not an accident. God delights to display His power through human weakness so that the glory belongs to Him alone. When a congregation treats the poor man at the door as an inconvenience, they may be dismissing precisely the kind of person God is in the habit of exalting. After his vision at Joppa, Peter arrived at this realization the hard way: *"Truly I understand that God shows no partiality"* (Acts 10:34). Simple words — but they cost Peter nearly everything he had previously assumed about who mattered.

Third, it breaks the royal law. *"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors"* (James 2:8–9). James calls it the *nomos basilikos* — the royal law — because it comes from the King. And partiality is a direct violation of it. To love your neighbor as yourself means extending to every person the dignity and genuine concern you would want extended to you. When we favor one person over another based on external appearances and circumstances, we have failed to love our neighbor.

James presses further: *"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it"* (James 2:10). God's law is a unified whole, reflecting a unified character. To violate one command is to declare that you are not fully submitted to the Lawgiver.⁴ The sin of partiality is not a minor social flaw. It is a transgression against the royal law of the King.

Part Three: Living Under the Law of Liberty

"So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:12–13).

The "law of liberty" is James's way of describing the Gospel — the good news of Jesus Christ that sets us free from condemnation. But the freedom of the Gospel is never a license to treat others carelessly. Just the opposite. The person who has received mercy is the person best equipped to show it. This especially true of God's mercy! The person who understands what it cost the Son of God to cover their sin should find it impossible to look at another sinner — rich or poor, familiar or strange — and decide they are not worth the trouble.

"Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). That is one of the most beautiful sentences in the New Testament. It is not saying that sin does not matter or that morality has been suspended. It is saying that in the economy of the kingdom, the person who extends mercy — who reflects the heart of God toward others — will find that mercy, rather than condemnation, defines their standing before Him.

Thomas Manton, the great Puritan expositor of James, wrote that this passage calls believers to a double consistency — consistency in doctrine and in practice. "It is not enough to hold the faith," he observed. "The faith must hold you — shape your dispositions [attitudes, opinions], govern your conduct, sanctify your affections."⁵ We are not merely to *believe* that all people are equal before God. We are to act like it...to live it — in how we welcome the stranger, how we notice the overlooked, how we extend to every person who crosses the threshold of our church the worthy and warmth that Christ extended to those who crossed His path.

Conclusion: A People Who Reflect the Glorious Lord

Paul's prayer for the church at Rome is a fitting close: "*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Romans 15:5–6).

The church glorifies God when it looks like Christ, not His personal appearance, but how He looked at people...how He *saw* people. And Christ looked at people — really looked at them — not through the lens of social standing or economic value, but through the lens of divine love, grace, and mercy. He saw Zacchaeus up in that tree not as a despised collaborator with Rome, but as a man who needed love, grace, and mercy. He saw the woman at the well not as an outcast with a dark past, but as someone who needed love, grace, and mercy...and who was ready to receive living water.

That is the vision James holds out for us. A community where the gold ring and the worn coat receive the same welcome...where the question is not "*What can this person do for us?*" but "*What has Christ done for this person — and what does that call us to do?*"

Peter eventually arrived at this understanding, though it required a vision, a divine rebuke, and a rather uncomfortable conversation with the apostle Paul. His question, when he finally got there, is worth borrowing: "*Who was I that I could stand in God's way?*" (Acts 11:17). Who, indeed, are we? Do you...Sir, Ma'am, or Miss...stand in God's way...between someone and the Cross? Get out of the way! Get your partiality out of the way. Instead of partiality as a barrier, let passion be a bridge.

For those who do not yet know Christ — James 2:10 is a word for you too. Every one of us has fallen short of the law we were given, in this matter and in others. The good news is that the God who shows no partiality in judgment (Romans 2:11) also shows no partiality in grace. His mercy, purchased at the cross of Christ, is offered to every person who will repent and believe. That invitation stands open today.

And for those of us who have already received that mercy — let us give it away freely, beginning with whoever walks through the door next Sunday morning.

Questions for Reflection and Application

1. Where in your own life — at church, at work, or in your community — do you find yourself most naturally giving preferential treatment based on appearance, status, or familiarity? What specific step could you take this week to extend deliberate welcome to someone you would ordinarily overlook?
2. When you meet someone new, what criteria are you *actually* using to determine how much attention and warmth you extend to them? How do those criteria compare to the way God evaluates people (James 2:4–5)?
3. James calls love for neighbor the "royal law" (James 2:8). Who, in your regular sphere of life, is a neighbor you are currently not loving with the same attentiveness you give to yourself or to those you find more comfortable? What would it look like to love that person as yourself — concretely, this week?
4. James closes with the declaration that "*mercy triumphs over judgment*" (James 2:13). In what relationships or situations are you currently withholding mercy — perhaps practicing a quiet, socially acceptable form of partiality by withdrawing warmth from those who have disappointed you or who don't fit your preferences? How does the mercy you have received in Christ call you to respond?

Footnotes

¹ The Greek term *prosōpolēmpsia* (James 2:1) is a compound of *prosōpon* (face) and *lambanō* (to receive or take). It refers to making judgments based on external appearances rather than genuine worth. The term appears in the New Testament at Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25, and James 2:1. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 99–100.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of James*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 74.

³ R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1985), 172.

⁴ For a helpful treatment of James 2:10 and the unity of the law, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, 115–116. Moo notes that James is not arguing for a "moral mathematics" in which all sins are equally weighty, but is making the point that the law is a unified expression of God's will; to knowingly violate any part of it reveals a disposition not fully submitted to the Lawgiver.

⁵ Thomas Manton, *A Commentary on James* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962 reprint of the 1693 edition), 191.