

# James 2.1-13

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## *Your love: blind or partial?*

St Editha's Amington

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James: Wholehearted Devotion to Jesus (4)

### **Love is...**

What's the first thing that comes to mind if I say, 'Love is...'? I came up with a few... I got to a slightly holier one in the end (patient)...! Perhaps you identify with this? Or maybe it's the unrequited kind?

And of course, there is the obligatory video of children being asked what they think love is...

Have any of you ever seen the TV show *Pointless*? Beforehand a hundred people are given a hundred seconds to come up with as many answers to a question as possible – and then the contestants have to guess what they think the fewest people said.

If the question were 'Love is...' I think James' answer would score pretty low: not showing favouritism. It makes sense, but it's not perhaps the first thing we might think of.

# Religion

James ended chapter 1 by talking about **religion** (1.27). By that he didn't mean old-fashioned ceremony that has lost all meaning, going through the motions, or doing things 'because we've always done it that way'.

Often that is what religion can become, and it isn't good when that happens – and it isn't what James is talking about here.

For James, ∫ 'religion' is about:

- ∫ making sure our outer life (our words and actions)
- ∫ matches up with our inner life (our faith and love)
- ∫ so we are not divided but whole (our devotion to Jesus)

This is why James is so practical, and why he kicks off chapter 2, not with some abstract thoughts, but a real problem his churches were facing – and it's a problem we sometimes face today, as well.

# Favouritism

Have you ever met anyone famous? What was it like? I saw Terry Wogan at an airport, and David Tennant on the other side of a crowd of screaming girls. I've also been in Windsor Castle at the same time as the Queen, but sadly she didn't invite me for tea.

But what would happen if a rich and famous person walked in at the back of church, and then a homeless person walked in? Who would get the most attention?

It's much easier to be friendly with 'people like us' – but much harder to be friendly with people who are less like us, who are more difficult, or who need more support than a friendly chat.

In James' example, two men enter the **meeting**: one is **wearing a gold ring and fine clothes**, the other **filthy old clothes** (2). One is given a place of honour, the best seat in the house – but the other is told to stand, or is humiliated by being made to sit (3).

My dear **brothers and sisters**, James says, we must not behave like this (1). And then he gives three reasons why.

First, what matters is our heart, not our outward appearance. Time and again in the Bible, God chooses the unlikely, the untrained, the ugly and the unloved – and he transforms them and does some amazing things through them.

And God still does that. He takes whatever we have to offer, and transforms it. My prayer is that he's doing that right now, as he takes these words, written by my sleep-deprived brain, and speaks truth and life into our hearts. Only he can do that.

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 2.5 (NIV)*

What matters is neither poverty, nor riches, but *faith*. What's important is that we are rich in *faith*, whether or not we have lots of stuff. What's important is the state of our hearts, not the size of our bank accounts.

James tells his readers – and that includes us, remember – to look beyond appearances, and treat everyone with equal respect.

But that doesn't mean agreeing with everything that happens.

The second reason James gives comes from common sense: these rich folks the churches are sucking up to are financially **exploiting** them (6), suing them (6), and **blaspheming** the **name** of God (7).

James makes his point with three questions, trying to show his readers how ridiculous they're being, how they're missing the point and getting things back to front. Instead of shunning the poor, who are rich in faith, they should be welcoming them. Instead of welcoming the rich, who are exploiting them and blaspheming God's name, they should be challenging their behaviour.

Remember our definition of ‘religion’? James is desperate for our outer life and our inner life to match up, so we are whole and not divided. When we discriminate based on appearances alone – completely ignoring the behaviour that *should* be challenged – we are divided, not acting according to our faith, but according to something else – most likely greed, when it involves rich people.

Don’t show favouritism, James says. We all need to look carefully at our attitude, to see if we are guilty of doing this. It doesn’t make sense, and it ignores the heart, which is what God looks at.

The third reason we mustn’t show favouritism is quite simple: God has commanded us not to in his **royal law** (8).

## **Law**

Cue the excuse for a lawyer joke.

The staff at a local Oxfam realised they had never received a donation from the town’s most successful lawyer.

The person in charge of donations called him to persuade him to contribute and said, ‘Our research shows that out of an income of £1,000,000 last year, you gave not a penny to charity. Wouldn’t you like to give back to the community in some way?’

The lawyer mulled this over for a moment and replied, ‘First, did your research also show that my mother is dying after a long illness, and has care bills that are several times her annual income?’

Embarrassed, the Oxfam representative mumbled, ‘Um... No.’

‘Or,’ the lawyer continued, ‘that my brother, a soldier who was caught in an explosion, is now blind and confined to a wheelchair?’

The stricken Oxfam representative began to stammer out an apology but was interrupted when the lawyer added, ‘Or that my sister’s husband died in a traffic accident,’ the lawyer’s voice rising in indignation, ‘leaving her penniless with three children?’

The humiliated Oxfam representative, completely beaten, said simply, ‘I had no idea...’

On a roll, the lawyer cut him off once again, ‘So if I don’t give any money to them, why should I give any to you?’

Apologies if you, or any member of your family is a lawyer.

God’s law is **royal** because it is spoken by God, our true King, and because it expresses his royal character of holiness. James isn’t saying that this one command is ‘royal’ and better than the rest – he is arguing that the *whole* law is **royal**.

There are two aspects of § the Law that James is trying to get across to his readers.

First, § *the law is indivisible*. Some commands might be weightier than others, some might be easier to follow, some might have more serious consequences – but **whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it** (10).

Think of it like a pane of glass: a stone hits only one point, but breaks the entire pane. Or a garden after a heavy snowfall, perfect with white snow – whether it's one footprint or a hundred, the scene is ruined. Or a still pond – whether you throw in a pebble or a massive boulder, the ripples spoil the water's surface equally.

James quotes a couple of the Ten Commandments, about adultery and murder. Maybe you haven't committed either of those – but don't forget they also include not lying or being jealous, taking adequate rest every week, and honouring God before everything and everyone else. And, don't forget Jesus said being angry with someone is as bad as murdering them, and looking at someone lustfully is as bad as committing adultery (see Matthew 5.21-28).

The law is indivisible, and the standard is perfection, so breaking one bit, however big or small, means the whole thing is broken.

And, as James says, we are **going to be judged by the law** (12). Sometimes Christians can overlook this challenging teaching, but it is consistent throughout the New Testament:

- Jesus (e.g. Matthew 25.31-46 ‘the sheep and the goats’)
- Paul (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5.10 ‘we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ’)
- Peter (e.g. 1 Peter 4.5 ‘we will have to give an account’)
- John, the apostle of love (e.g. Revelation 20.13 ‘each person was judged’)

We *are* going to be judged.

Even if you reduce the Law down to one command – **love your neighbour as yourself** – does that help? (Actually, that command was not made up by Jesus – he quoted it from Leviticus 19.18.)

How should we love ourselves?<sup>1</sup> When you look at yourself in the mirror in the morning, do you feel an emotional thrill or a surge of attraction? I hope not! That isn’t what ‘love’ is, nor what the Bible is getting at. Instead, it’s about concern, care and attention. Most of the time we are concerned about our own well-being, we care for our bodies, and we pay attention to our needs. *That* is how we love ourselves: not with emotion but with *care*.



That is how we are commanded to love our neighbour: with *care*. And who is our neighbour? Jesus shocked the religious teachers by saying *even our enemies are our neighbours*. Those we don't like, whether they deserve it or not – Jesus tells us to love, to *care* for *everyone*. If that were the only commandment Christians have to follow – which it isn't, by the way – how are we doing?

But second, ¶ *the law is freedom* (12). That is a strange thing to say when James has just condemned us all to judgement.

But God's Law has *always* been about freedom. Think about when the Law was given – was it before, or after, God had freed his people from slavery in Egypt? *It was afterwards*. He had *already* chosen his people, he had *already* shown himself to them, and he had *already* rescued them from slavery.

God had done all that – he had set his people free – and *then* he gave them the Law to show them how to respond in gratitude and faith, to show them how to live the life he always intended them to live, to show them how to fulfil God's promise to Abraham and be a blessing to the whole world.

Where does the cart go? ¶ The cart goes *after* the horse.

The Law was *always* about freedom.

The world thinks it understands ‘freedom’ – it thinks being ‘free’ means ‘doing whatever you want’. But the famous theologian – Bono – put it like this ¶:

You hurt yourself, you hurt your lover –  
then you discover:  
what you thought was freedom was just greed.

*U2, ‘Gone’*

Karl Barth – another of my favourite theologians – said that rejecting God’s law doesn’t bring freedom, but slavery; rejecting God’s law doesn’t make us *more* free, it makes us *less* free.

The world’s idea of freedom isn’t freedom at all, but a return to slavery – slavery to greed, to selfishness, to lust, anger and lies, slavery to wealth and power and position and status, slavery to gossip and appearance, slavery to a shallow and temporary love – slavery to everything that leads to death.

From all that, God wants to set people free. And if he’s set *us* free from all that, why do we still show partiality and judge people based on their appearance? We shouldn’t! If he’s set *us* free from all that, why do we not show that same love to others? We should!

*Pause*

James may be blunt and challenging – he certainly doesn't pull any punches – but he also knows the fundamental truth of God's kingdom: it doesn't depend on what I've done, it depends on what Jesus has done. His gift of life is the horse, the way we live that life according to his **royal law** is the cart – don't put the cart before the horse.

Through Jesus, we can all receive mercy from God, be set free from slavery, and live the life God always intended us to live – according to his **royal law**.

Is that what you want? Friends, let us learn from God how to love and care for *everyone*, no matter who they are or what they've done – because that is how God loves *us*.

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<sup>1</sup> For this paragraph, see Motyer, *James (BST)*, 97.