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**Impartial Faith**

***James 2:1-13***

**Introduction**

I want to piggyback off the final two verses from the first chapter in James that we looked at last week, which states: “**If anyone thinks himself to be religious, yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world**” (1:26-27). From these two verses, I have two questions that help us make more sense of the verses that follow in James 2:1-13. The first question we need to ask is this: What makes faith worthless? The person who says that he/she believes and follows Jesus yet has not bridled their tongue. The second question is this: If undefiled religion is to visit orphans and widows in their distress, what is defiled religion? It is a person of faith who claims to follow Jesus but ignores the most vulnerable of society: Widows and orphans.

In the first century, widows and orphans were vulnerable. Widows faced economic hardships without a male in the home to provide. Orphans lacked the protection of a father. Widows without children were at times isolated and ostracized. Orphans often were without the tender care of their mothers. In many ways, widows and orphans were marginalized in society. For the first century church, the care of widows and orphans was a social justice issue that the first century church understood needed to be address as we are all commanded to address: “**Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, obtain justice for the orphan, plead for the widow’s case**” (Isa. 1:17). Because the needs of the widows and orphans grew, and were beginning to be overlooked, the leaders in the first century church charged a group of men with the task of looking after such people (see Acts 6:1-6).

So why is this important when our text this morning is James 2:1-13? Because a faith that rests in Jesus is one that responds to the needs of the marginalized. When a person goes from spiritual death to spiritual life and is born again, there are two levels of love that begin to flow through the spiritual veins of the one who is now a living and breathing child of God, and that is a love for God and a love for one’s neighbor. When you are born again your new love for God begins to flow to the point of overflowing to the point that it is expressed in the Christian’s horizontal relationships. This is why when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, He said: “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.**’ **This is the great and foremost commandment**” (Matt. 22:37). However, Jesus did not stop there, He continued: “**The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Upon these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets**”

James was no doubt aware of Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ question concerning the greatest commandment. The first four commandments concern our love and relationship with God and the final six commandments concern our love and relationship with our neighbors. Jesus begins with the greatest commandment because how we treat our neighbor reflects the condition of our relationship with God. This is why James wrote in verse 10, “**For whoever keeps the whole Law, yet stumbles in one point, has become guilty of all.**” The NLT translates this verse in a way that ought to help you get the point James is making: “**For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God’s laws.**” In other words each of the Ten Commandments are inter-connected. It is not segmented or impartial just like genuine and saving faith is not impartial.

**Impartial Faith is Gracious (vv. 1-5)**

I am not sure what was going on in these churches of the Christians James was writing to, but it seems that something was off relationally concerning how they treated one another. Apparently, the rich were treated with some level of favoritism over the poor. We know this because of what James writes in verses 1, “**My brothers and sisters, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism**.” James did not write this to keep these Christians from showing favoritism but was forbidding them from doing what they already were doing. If you are a Christian, then you are a “**bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**” (v. 1).

To be a bond-servant is to be a slave of Christ; the bond-servant of Jesus means that you are neither free nor hired, but property of your Master. Don’t think of slavery to Jesus as something degrading, for in slavery to Jesus is where true freedom is known. However, to be a bond-servant of Christ and to show favoritism by treating one person more valuable than the other is a contradiction – especially the kind of favoritism James was addressing related to the way the rich were treated over the poor. We know this because of the verses that follow:

**For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and is dressed in bright clothes, and a poor man in dirty clothes also comes in, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the bright clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?** (vv. 2-4)

The gold ring on a person’s finger was worn by the upper-level Roman “equestrian” class. Those with a gold-ring were not only wealthy, but were highly influential. Now think of what it would have been like if you were a marginalized Christian Jew, who had an upper-level Roman citizen walk into your church service who also claimed to be a brother or sister in Christ? You might be tempted to think that if you could just get close to this person, that may help in your standing in society! Surely close friendship with the person who wore the gold-ring would be a better use of your time than friendship with another poor and marginalized Christian. To treat one person with more honor than the other because of their social status in this world is to discount the fact that regardless of their social standing, all people bear the image of God and should be treated as such.

What made the situation even more grievous is that this kind of favoritism was going on among Christians whose salvation had nothing to do with their standing in society. The apostle Paul addressed some of the same issues within the Corinthian church when he wrote the following:

**For consider your calling, brothers and sisters, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the insignificant things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no human may boast before God.**

So in response to this kind of favoritism, James admonished these Christians: “**Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters: did God not choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?**”In other words, the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong, all have the same thing in common from the moment of birth: We are all born alienated from God and are by nature dead in our sins. Yet, Jesus found us and died for us, and it is through His redeeming work that regardless of your social status, your tribe, or what part of the world you were born in or currently live... He died for sinners such as us!

**Impartial Faith is Loving (vv. 5-9)**

The same grace the rich are in dire need to receive, is the same grace available to the poor. The same grace that is available to the Jew is also available to the Gentile! The thing that the apostle Peter had a difficult time wrapping his mind around initially was that salvation was equally made available to Gentiles, and that Jesus is equally the Lamb of God, the Lion of Judah, and the Messiah to the Jew as He is to those who grew up eating ham sandwiches, peperoni pizza, Italian hoagies, fried shrimp, and even pork feet. A Jew would not even go into the home of a Gentile because they were considered “unclean.” Peter was one such Jew until God rebuked him and told him not to label unclean what God has made clean (see Acts 10:9ff). After Peter was sent into the home of a Gentile and witnessed God’s saving work in the entire household of Cornelious, he responded: “Opening his mouth, Peter said: “**I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him**” (Acts 10:34-35).

Peter’s issue was that he could not see how the God of the Hebrews could love and save unclean Gentiles. Peter’s sin was really not that different than the favoritism that was shown for the rich over the poor in the churches James wrote his epistle to. It is nothing new that the poor are marginalized or forgotten in the world. Consider the Netflix documentary titled *Gone Girls*; Rex Heuermann was able to murder scores of prostitutes because they were not treated with the same value as other women. It is estimated that 50 million people live in slavery in our world on this very day. Consider the following statistics related to the 50 million slaves that exist in our world today:

* **27.6 million victims of human trafficking worldwide**.
* **23% of these victims (roughly 6.3 million people)** are trafficked for **commercial sexual exploitation**.
* **78% of those trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation are women and girls and 22% are men and boys**.
* **92% of sex trafficking victims are adults, and 8% are children**.

Add to this that in 2024, there was an estimated 1.14 million abortions in the United States alone! We live in a world that that does not value human life. Regarding the partialism that James addressed, he was not surprised that it was happening in a fallen world, he was heartbroken that it was happening among those who claimed to follow Jesus. Why? Because of all people, we who are the redeemed of the Lord Jesus, ought to understand that we bear the image of the living God. To dehumanize a person based on their social or economic status is not only evil, but such behavior blasphemes the Name of the God whose image we reflect (v. 7-8).

You can say that you love God all that you want, but according to James 2:9, if you show partiality, you are committing sin by violating the commandments concerning the way we must love our neighbor. In James’ view (as is true in the rest of the Bible), if you do not love your neighbor, can you really say that you love the God who sent His son to die for that person? Can James be any clearer: “**But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the Law as violators**” (v. 9).

**Impartial Faith is Merciful (vv. 10-13)**

Christian, we are a people who have received mercy, and it was not ordinary mercy you received. The mercy you received is not like the mercy a police officer may have shown you by refraining from writing you the ticket you deserved. The apostle Paul described the kind of mercy you received in this way: “**But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our wrongdoings, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)**...” The mercy we have received is “rich” and it is a mercy we did not deserve, nor could we earn.

Now, just so you know, verse 10 was written within the context of dehumanizing, ignoring, or treating as less important the “poor” because they do not have the influence that the “wealthy” have. I have and will continue to use verse 10 when I share the gospel with others, which states: “**For whoever keeps the whole Law, yet stumbles in one point, has become guilty of all.**” In other words, if you are feeling good about not violating the first and second commandments because you do not bow down to any idol in worship and claim to worship God alone, but break any of the other commandments, you are guilty of being a commandment breaker.

What does it mean to break any one of God’s commandments? James tells us in verse 11, “**For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but do murder, you have become a violator of the Law.**” Jesus said that if you look at another woman with lust, you are guilty of adultery (see Matt. 5:27-28), and He also said that if you hate or verbally abuse another person, you are also guilty of murder (see Matt. 5:21-22). What’s the point? The point is that we have sinned, still sin, and will sin; it is for all our sins that Jesus was crucified, bled, and slaughtered. The prophet Isaiah wrote of Jesus: “**But He was pierced for our offenses, He was crushed for our wrongdoings; the punishment for our well-being *was laid* upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed**” (Isa. 53:5); the apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 3:13, “**Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a Tree**...**’**” We have been forgiven of so much, and the price paid upon His cross was, is, and will always be enough! Because of the rich mercy we continue to receive, James issues a command in verses 12-13, “**So speak, and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of freedom. For judgment will be merciless to the one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.**” What is the law of freedom? It is the royal law of love! Why did you receive mercy? You received mercy and now you are born again Christian, “...**because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our wrongdoings, made us alive together with Christ**” (Eph. 2:5).

**Conclusion**

Because of the mercy we have received, the fruit of our faith is to be saturated by the grace, love, and mercy we received in the way we treat our neighbors. In case you are not clear on what that looks like, Jesus could not have made it any clearer: “**I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples: if you have love for one another**” (John 13:34-35).

The sin of partiality is not only in how we treat the wealthy over the poor. The sin of partiality comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. It can come in how we value a person based on the color of their skin or ethnicity. It can also come in how we rightfully stand against abortion while remaining silent regarding the sexual exploitation of children. We ought not to be surprised when the sin of partiality is present in our world, but it ought to grieve our hearts when it finds its way into Christ’s church. We who have received the grace, love, and mercy of God through Jesus Christ ought to be known as a people whose words and actions embody the essence of the grace, love, and mercy we freely received.