

Impartial Love

James 2:1-13

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 poor 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?

⁸ You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁹ But if you show partiality, you commit 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 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. ¹² So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Theme Statement

Can love favor one group over another, such as the rich over the poor? This is a question troubling the community to whom the author of James writes, just as it is for us today. Loving all our neighbors is the issue.

Exploring the Word

In this session we are introduced to another troubling situation in the early church. The letter from James to a group gathered in Jesus' name identified partiality as a sin among them. The author realized that the group favored rich people over poor people, golden rings over dirty clothes. It would have been easy to fall into that trap. Unfortunately, many groups tend to divide themselves up into participants who are more desirable and those who are less. In this case it seems distinctions between those who were rich and those who were poor had been established. Troubling, isn't it, that the desire to be "better" than someone else can trump empathy?

James 2:1-4 Partiality

The Greek word that we translate as "favoritism" (v. 1) or "partiality" (v. 9) is *prosopolempsia*. The literal meaning of this word is "taking face." We might understand this word better by remembering that we caution ourselves not to take someone at face value. The author of James regarded taking someone at face value, and then showing favoritism, to be contrary to what they had learned from "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1). The admonishment is clear and stern: Don't judge others with your "evil thoughts" (v. 4).

Welcome everyone equally. Let the poorest of the poor sit with you, not stand or grovel subserviently at your feet. Allow neither abject poverty nor rich clothing to make a difference in your assembly.

James 2:5-8 The royal law

Several probing questions occur in these verses. The first concerned God's choice of the poor to be "rich in faith" and "heirs of the kingdom" (v. 5). This proclamation is closely related to Luke 6:20, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." The people who were poor were the very folk whom the people in this congregation were disparaging, and the people with whom Jesus spent most of his time during his years on earth. They were the people in the assembly whose feet were bleeding, whose belly buttons touched their backbones, and whose children cried from exhaustion and hunger.

Three rhetorical questions follow, all asking which group, the rich or the poorest of the poor, caused the people trouble. Hint: It's not poor people who oppress rich people, sue them, or toss God's name into the air as a curse.

The good news of God's royal law couldn't have been more welcome after the scoldings that the people in this community had just been given. Love your neighbor as you love yourselves. A royal law, indeed.

James 2:9-13 Partiality excluded

The author of James's letter returns again to the sin of partiality in their community. The recurrence of this topic came immediately after the call to make no exceptions in loving everyone. The "law of liberty" mercifully enters the discourse (v. 12) in the last verses of the text we are studying. This law meant that the people were free to abandon partiality. They were free to speak and act mercifully to

one another. Those who failed to do so would be judged harshly, but "mercy triumphs over judgment" (v. 13b).

The Word Today

In the thirteen sessions of this Bible study we have been delving into what it means to have love for one another. At first glance this topic sounded simple. "I already do that" we might have thought when we began. However, we've discovered that loving one another can be complicated. Could loving each other have been any more tangled than the hatred, distance, and final embrace in the Joseph story? The saga of Saul, David, and Saul's son Jonathan was just as convoluted. The mandate to love and serve our enemies and neighbors challenged us as much as it did a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan.

We've pondered the differing kinds of love that we experience, how we respond to the call to serve each other in love, and what it means to abide in love. Vines and branches can help us understand what it means to live in Jesus. We've encountered three different worshipping communities who ran into difficulties when they didn't realize the fullness of Jesus' love for them and his call to love and serve one another.

Going through the thirteen sessions of our study about loving each other has been an interesting exercise, hasn't it? But we're not done yet. We're not finished until we tie towels around our waists and do what Jesus called us to do. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34).

Our wet hands and towels are not the evidence that will help us gather stars for our crowns. They are not responses to our checklists of things we have to do because Jesus

commanded us to do them. They are not about fixing someone and our troubled world. Tying on those towels is about living as God's children. It is about loving one another so much that our hearts break in times of trouble. Living by loving with all that we are is the very best way to live. It's how Jesus lived, isn't it? It is the way of life that comes, as my pastor says, with God's wet, sloppy kiss that is baptism.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are the gifts from God that fill our lives, now and forever. Thanks be to God!

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. When has your congregation experienced stress because someone poorer than those who had already gathered arrived to join in worship? What was that stress about? What happened?

Exploring the Word

1. Imagine some reasons the people in the community to whom James wrote were drawn to evil thoughts about the poor people who entered their assembly. Consider possible ways Jesus' message of love for one another, no matter who, had become diluted or forgotten.

2. In the list of examples below from the gospels, connect the rich people in the left column with the reason for Jesus' admonishments in the right:

the rich fool

for not showing
mercy to a beggar

the nemesis of the
poor man Lazarus

for not contributing
sacrificially

scribes and Pharisees

for hoarding

the rich and their
offerings

for exalting
themselves

3. What is your favorite account of Jesus interacting with a poor person?
4. What do you imagine judgment was like for the people in James 2:1-13? What sin do you think they might have wished to keep secret? What did they do when that secret was called out? What would it be like when "mercy triumphs over judgment" (v. 13)?

The Word Today

1. Think about the people in your worshiping community. Allow yourself to privately name the ones to whom you are partial. List the reasons behind your partiality. Now name those you look down on. What will you do to change your judgmental behavior?
2. Is there one of the thirteen sessions in this study that you will particularly remember? Why? What does the topic in that session have to do with your life today as God's child?

Closing Prayer

O God who knows no partiality, help us erase the divisions we've created in our minds about who is or who is not worthy of you. Grow love for one another in us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Further Study

Luke 6:20-26; Galatians 3:27-28

Daily Readings

M. Matthew 12:1-8

F. James 2:14-17

T. 1 Peter 1:17-23

S. James 2:18-26

W. Galatians 3:6-9, 13-14

S. James 2:1-13

T. Exodus 2:1-10

Memorization

James 2:8

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."