

James 2:1-13

1. Jesus taught “blessed are the poor in spirit”, and James expands, “has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to the heirs of the kingdom?” The poor (Mt adds “in spirit”) are those who recognize their need for God, who are better able to follow Jesus because they have less to lose (cf. the RYR, Mk 10:17-27; Isa 66:2; 1 Cor 1:29). As Blomberg and Kovalishyn put it, “God is on the side of the poor, not because they are poor, but because they are responsive to him...” So James tells us to honor the poor because God has honored them.

Can we also infer that the poor may have insights that we don’t, simply because they are *forced* to rely on God in ways we aren’t? What about the other blessings of Mt 5, those who mourn, the meek, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted? What would it mean to seek these out for wisdom and teaching?

2. The very early church leaders responded to complaints of favoritism of Jewish widows over Gentile by deliberately raising up to positions of leadership a group of Hellenistic Jewish believers. In our culture we see favoritism shown not just to the rich, but to the young, the white, the male, etc. While our suburban locations may prevent the poor from easily wandering into our churches, too often our councils are monochromatic. What can we do about this? What, if anything, do you feel the Spirit convicting us of in this area?
3. James refers to the “law” (9-11), the “royal law” (8), and the “law of liberty” (12). Based 2:1-13 and 1:25, can you identify each of these?
4. James contrasts two groups in 1:25. The first are those who are all holy talk but no action, who “deceive themselves”, and who look into a mirror and forget what they saw. The second look into the “law of liberty” and persevere in actually loving others. What does it mean to “look into the law of liberty?”
5. “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be shown without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:12-13). What does this mean?
 - a. Awareness of God’s mercy toward us is what motivates us to show it to others
 - b. The judgmental rich will be judged; the merciful poor will be spared
 - c. If you are judgmental, others will not show mercy toward you, but if you are merciful, others will see that and show you mercy
 - d. Everyone will be shown mercy, as all are sinners
 - e. Those who show no mercy are condemned
 - f. Real Christians can’t help but show mercy toward others
6. In the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), what is the meaning of “mercy” (10:37)? What is it in James 2:1-13?
7. Jesus is well known for keeping the company of everyone from middle class fishermen, the well-off (Lazarus and his sisters) to the untouchable tax collectors, prostitutes and even on at least one occasion Samaritans. Jesus seemed to make people on either side of any aisle feel equally welcome. You’ve been studying the person and life of Jesus for decades. Given your experience, how exactly did Jesus do this?

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Fun fact: “To avoid partiality on the basis of clothing, some second-century rabbis required both litigants to dress in the same kind of clothes.” Also: “Roman laws explicitly favored the rich. Persons of lower class, who were thought to act from economic self-interest, could not bring accusations against persons of higher class, and the laws prescribed harsher penalties for lower-class persons convicted of offenses than for offenders from the higher class.” (Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, on 2:3-4)

The Letter of James

Sermon on the Mount (Gospel of Matthew)

"Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy" (1:4).

"When people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you . . . rejoice and be glad" (5:1–12).

"You may be mature [teleios] and complete, lacking in nothing" (1:4).

"Be perfect [teleios] . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).

"Ask God . . . and it will be given you" (1:5).

"Ask, and it will be given you" (7:7).

"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (1:22).

"Everyone then who hears these words . . . and acts on them will be like a wise person" (7:24).

"Has not God chosen the poor in the world . . . to be heirs of the kingdom?" (2:5).

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3).

"Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (2:10).

"Whoever, then, relaxes one of the least of these commandments . . . shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (5:19).

"Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy" (2:13).

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (5:7).

"What good is it . . . if you say you have faith, but do not have works? Can faith save you?" (2:14).

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father" (7:21).

"Can a fig tree . . . yield olives, or a grapevine figs?" (3:12).

"Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" (7:16).

"A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace" (3:18).

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (5:9).

"Friendship with the world is enmity with God" (4:4).

"You cannot serve God and wealth" (6:24).

"Purify your hearts" (4:8).

"Blessed are the pure in heart" (5:8).

"Who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?" (4:12).

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (7:1).

"Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten; your gold and silver have rusted" (5:2–3).

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal" (6:19).

"Do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged" (5:9).

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (7:1).

"Do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes be yes and your 'No' be no" (5:12).

"Do not swear at all, either by heaven . . . or by the earth . . . Let your word be 'Yes' or 'No,' No" (5:34–37).

Other passages in James that parallel sayings of Jesus include 1:6 (cf. Matt. 21:21); 1:9 and 4:10 (cf. Matt. 23:12); 1:12 (cf. Matt. 10:22); 1:21 (cf. Mark 4:14); 4:9 (cf. Luke 6:21, 25); 4:17 (cf. Luke 12:47); 5:1–6 (cf. Luke 6:24); 5:9 (cf. Matt. 24:33); 5:17 (cf. Luke 4:25).

The Royal Command of Love

The letter of James not only contains teaching similar to the sayings of Jesus; it also adopts the hermeneutic of Jesus, maintaining that love is the key to fulfilling God's law and doing God's will.

Jesus said that love for God and love for neighbor are the greatest commandments, the ones on which "all the law and the prophets" depend (Matt. 22:36–40; cf. Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:25–28). He summarized ethics with the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

James likewise identifies "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) as "the royal law" (2:8), "the law of liberty" (1:25; 2:12), and "the perfect law" (1:25). Faced with the prospect of keeping the whole law, with all its various points, believers do well to concentrate on this commandment (2:8–10).

James further interprets this royal law in context. He appears to have examined the Old Testament section in which the command to love one's neighbor appears and incorporated more of what that part of the Bible says into his moral exhortations:

- Leviticus 19:12 forbids swearing false oaths (cf. James 5:12).
- Leviticus 19:13 forbids withholding wages from laborers (cf. James 5:4).
- Leviticus 19:15 forbids showing partiality to the rich (cf. James 2:1–12).
- Leviticus 19:16 forbids slander and evil talk (cf. James 4:11–12).
- Leviticus 19:17 commends reproof as a way to reconciliation (cf. James 5:20).
- Leviticus 19:18a discourages vengeance and holding grudges (cf. James 5:9).
- Leviticus 19:18b commands "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (cf. James 2:8).

See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 123–35.

References in James 2:1-13

Background from chapter 1:

- 9 Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. 10 But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. 11 For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.
- 22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.
- 26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 2:5: 5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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?

- “Listen, my beloved brothers. Didn’t God choose those who are poor in this world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the Kingdom which he promised to those who love him?” (Jas 2:5 WEB);
- “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matt 5:3 WEB);
- ‘He lifted up his eyes to his disciples, and said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God”’ (Luke 6:20 WEB).
- I cor 1:26-29: 26 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him.
- RYR (Mk 10:17-27)

James 2:11-12: 11 For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,”[b] also said, “You shall not murder.”[c] If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. 12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,

- “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’” (Matt 5:27 WEB), “You have heard that it was said to the ancient ones, ‘You shall not murder;’ and ‘Whoever shall murder shall be in danger of the judgment’” (Matt 5:21 WEB).

James 2:13: 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

- “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt 5:7 WEB);
- “But if you don’t forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt 6:15 WEB);
- “Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you” (Matt 7:1-2 WEB).
- 1 John 4:17: 17 This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.
- Mt 18:33: 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’

Extra questions and observations:

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Leader's Intro:

This passage at first looks obvious, and the central message should not be lost in the exegesis: James has just told us what “true religion” is, and gives us a specific application here: we should not show favoritism. However, if we stop there, we miss a deep passage, because James backs up his teaching with multiples reasons which demonstrate how to understand some of Jesus’ more enigmatic teaching from the SOTM. Careful reading of this passage transforms what on the surface appears to be legalistic into just the opposite. It also takes much abused teachings like “blessed are the poor” and “do not judge, or you too will be judged” and gives us insight into how they were understood and applied by someone among those closest to Jesus.

Before we dig in, it’s worth looking at two tables which help us see the material that James is teaching from. We already know that in some sense James is a commentary on the SOTM. What is not as commonly known is how James draws on the chapter of Leviticus that teaches the Golden Rule (see the reverse side of the questions sheet for charts from Mark Alan Powell’s NT text—but beware his comments on the “royal law”, where he incorrectly equates it with the “law of liberty” (NRSV—or “the law that brings freedom” in the NIV); see Blomberg and Kovalishyn.

For context two things are worth bearing in mind:

1. James speaks of the poor as favored by God, and the rich as abusers of the poor. The context to be born in mind is that of 1 Cor 1:26-29, that the recipients of this circular were almost entirely not from the wealthy classes and likely many poor or slaves.
2. James argues that showing favoritism shouldn’t be seen as a minor offense because all sins leave the sinner a law breaker as thoroughly as if a murder were committed. That he jumps to such an extreme case is hyperbolic, but not out of the realm of their world. They needed only think of the sicarii among the zealots, who assassinated the culturally accommodated Hellenistic Jews, while seeking to follow the Torah in other areas, never recognizing the contradiction.

Notes

- The Greek of 2:1 uses a construction which implies that the community to which this is addressed is engaged in favoritism. (Same in 4.)
- “Poor man” in v. 2
- Note (1 Cor 1:26-29), the early church (despite Stark’s book) was largely not drawn from the wealthy classes
- James not only draws on the SOTM but on Lev 19, and in this passage particularly on 19:15 (forbidding partiality) and 19:18 (golden rule)

I. Background

a. ...

II. Words and Phrases

a. ...

III. Themes

a. ...

IV. Observations

a. ...

V. Questions

a. ...

VI. To do

a. ...