

“A Transgressor of the Law”

Texts: James 2:1-13; Exodus 20:1-17

The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of James

Christianity is a revolutionary religion which utterly confounds those who do not have faith in Christ. Sinful human nature tells us that good people go to heaven and that bad people go to hell. But Christianity teaches that God justifies the wicked. Sinful human nature tells us that the standard by which we judge people is external: beauty, fame, accomplishments, power, and fortune. But Christianity teaches that God’s standard of judgment is the Ten Commandments. In the first-century world in which the Epistle of James was written, society was dominated by social castes and wealthy land-owners. But James tells his audience that Christians must show no partiality, either to the rich, or to the poor. Furthermore, James points out how flawed human judgment can be when it comes to matters of sin and salvation. Sinful human nature tells us that people who have more good deeds than bad deeds somehow make it to heaven. But James tells us that God is not going to grade the final exam for eternal life on a curve—God’s passing mark is 100% perfect obedience. In fact, as James will point out, commit but a single sin, and God regards you as a law-breaker, guilty of breaking all of his commandments. In this sense, Christianity is an utterly revolutionary religion because it completely levels the human playing field. All of us are sinners who deserve to be punished. This is why we have no business judging anyone else. God saves sinners based not upon their merits, but upon the merits of Christ. And once saved by the merits of Christ, all manner of good works spring forth. Non-Christians simply cannot understand this because this is so contrary to sinful human nature.

As we continue our series on the Epistle of James we now make our way into the first thirteen verses of James chapter 2. In this section of his epistle, James takes up a discussion of the evils of discrimination, in particular the way in which wealthy land-owners and merchants throughout Palestine and Syria were exploiting those in James’ audience who were suffering this persecution and hardship because of their loyalty to Christ. Many of those to whom this epistle is addressed—the twelve tribes of the diaspora (persecuted Jewish Christians)—had been cut off from all ties to family, work, and both the temple and the synagogue, because they became followers of Jesus. Evicted from the synagogue and rejected by their families, many joined newly formed house-churches, but were being looked down upon in these assemblies because of their poverty, an important pastoral matter James now addresses head-on.

In many ways, this section of James amounts to the author fleshing out several of the comments he made at the end of the first chapter. In verse 22, James exhorted his audience to “*be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*” In verse 27, James spoke of the need to show compassion to the poor. “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*” Therefore, the theme of this next section of James—a theme to which James will return in chapter five—is that discrimination against the poor is a violation of the law of God. In fact, based upon what James has said in chapter one about those who hear the word but do not do the word, it is not a stretch to conclude that those who use worldly standards to judge each other in self-righteousness are actually self-deceived. The standard of measurement which counts is not someone’s opinion, or their sinful prejudices. The standard of measurement that God uses is his law. And when we are measured against that standard, all of us quickly realize that we are sinners.

As chapter two opens, James exhorts his reader in general terms not to discriminate, before moving on in verses 2-4 to give a very specific example of how such discrimination is occurring within the churches of

Palestine and Syria. In verses 5-6, James speaks of God's attitude toward the poor, before reminding his readers that the rich—who many people in the church often try to impress—are actually the ones exploiting the poor and needy. Finally, James goes on to point out that this behavior violates the law of God which commands us to love our neighbor as we would love ourselves.

It is important to notice that this discussion sets the stage for our topic next week (Lord willing) of James' comment in 2:24 that "*you see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*" As I have been arguing throughout this series, James comments about the relationship between faith and works make perfect sense if James was written in the mid 40's of the first-century, before the controversy over justification between Jewish Christians and Gentile converts broke in Asia Minor in A.D. 48. Since I made my case for this early date for this epistle in our first sermon, I would encourage you to get a copy, since this will explain my overall approach to James and the supposed controversy with Paul, as well as setting out the historical circumstances which James is addressing.

As we saw last time, James sets forth the proposition that God is the author of every good and perfect gift. It is God who brings sinners forth to life through the preaching of the word. It is God implants that word within those whom he brings forth. Christians must humbly receive that word when it is preached to them. Therefore, James' main point in verses 19-21 is simply this. Because God has made us alive, we must have a living and active faith, which seeks to obey God's commandments and to put away all filthiness. People do this because they are Christians (and already justified). They don't do these things with the hope that if they do enough of them, they will be justified.

This means that the person whom James is rebuking in this epistle is someone who "hears the word" (i.e., who makes a profession of faith in Christ), but who then gives no demonstrable evidence that they do what the word commands, especially in the face of trials and persecution. James speaks of this "hearing" and "doing" in terms of a Christian's need to strip off our sins, just as we strip off our dirty clothes at the end of the day. Those who hear the word but who do not do the word, are like people who gaze at themselves in a mirror, but then quickly forget what they look like. They are completely self-absorbed. But someone who gazes intently upon the law (through the lens of Christ's fulfillment of the law) will persevere under trial. Why? They gain God's wisdom and perspective on their trials. They are not left with their own mere reflection upon themselves, they are given God's perspective on their struggles.

As we move into James chapter 2, we turn to an exhortation which very likely speaks to the situation in the churches to which James is writing. While James does not mention any specific church, he does describe very specific behavior.

That James is addressing an issue in the churches (and is not speaking of some hypothetical circumstance) is clear from verse one, where he speaks to his "brothers" and again in verse two when he speaks of "your assembly." This problematic behavior is going on in church services held in private homes—James has either heard reports or has witnessed this behavior in person—and must be stopped. Even though James opens this discussion in rather general terms, he gets specific very quickly.

In verse 1, James writes, "*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*" The exhortation is direct and straight-forward. Christians are not to show favoritism or discriminate against other Christians based upon solely their social-standing and outward appearance. According to James, those who engage in such practices are acting inconsistently with their profession of faith in Jesus Christ. While the point of the verse is to exhort his readers not to discriminate, there are two important doctrinal elements in this verse which are easy to overlook, and which set the stage for

what follows later on in the chapter.

The first matter is that James speaks of Jesus Christ as both Lord (*kurios*), and as Lord of glory—a highly exalted title for his half-brother. Obviously, James’ perspective on Jesus’ identity has changed greatly since Jesus first appeared to him after the resurrection. While James may be applying a common Old Testament title for God directly to Jesus (“Lord of glory”), the word “glory” is never used in the New Testament as a title for either God or Jesus—unless it is here. Perhaps it is better to think of James as referring to “glory” (the “Lord of glory”) as a reference to Jesus’ Lordship over that heavenly sphere where God dwells, and where even now (as James writes) Jesus Christ dwells as the exalted Lord. This would fit with James’ comment in James 5:9, “*behold, the Judge [Jesus] is standing at the door*”—an obvious reference to Jesus in his exalted state (as judge). This interpretation would fit nicely with James’ primary concern that people in the churches to whom he is writing have been giving too much “glory” to those who are rich and powerful in the eyes of the world.¹ True glory belongs to Christ alone!

The second point can also be easily skipped over, but is vital in understanding James’ comment in the following verses that “*a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*” Here, in verse 1, James speaks of “*those who have faith in Jesus, the Lord of Glory.*” Such people are not to show favoritism. Again, notice the logical relationship here between faith and action. Those who have faith (as a present possession) in the Lord of glory (Jesus) are not to show favoritism. This means that faith in Christ precedes not showing favoritism. Faith in Christ is therefore the basis for the prescribed action. Nowhere in this epistle does James even remotely imply that in order to become a Christian, or in order to be justified, that we must do good works. In that case, James would be saying that we do not discriminate against the poor or favor the rich, so as to become right with God.

In fact, that is the Rome’s way of understanding James 2:24—that our works are somehow a part of (or the basis for) our justification, even when Rome argues that these works are energized by God’s grace. Now, assuming that James does not contradict himself in the span of a just few verses, in verse one of chapter two, James says that faith in Christ (trust) precedes not showing favoritism. What is implied is not that we are justified before God in doing this. Rather, the exhortation is framed so that if anyone claims to trust in the Lord of glory, they should not demonstrate favoritism to the rich or discriminate against the poor. According to James, faith in Jesus is the basis for doing the good work. This is how we must understand James here, and this is how we must understand James in verse 24. Otherwise, we make James contradict himself and we foolishly pit James against Paul.

The more practical point at hand is that James’ exhortation is aimed at professing Christians who are judging people based upon their appearance—either their fine clothing, or their disheveled appearance and low social standing. This is especially heinous at a time when such people are suffering not because they somehow angered God who is now punishing them, but because they have come to believe that Jesus is the Lord of glory and now they are being persecuted because of their profession of faith in Christ. God is no respecter of persons. He looks upon the heart and not the external appearances. This is why we must never show favoritism or discriminate based on external appearances. We cannot see within. In this, James is clearly echoing the law as stated in Leviticus 19:15. “*You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.*” Those who trust in the Lord of glory must leave these judgments to God. He will make them. These judgments are not ours to make.

¹ See the very helpful discussion of this in; Moo, [The Epistle of James](#), 100-102.

Moving from the general principle to the specific circumstance, in verses 2-4, James describes something then going-on in the churches of the diaspora. “*For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ while you say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there,’ or, ‘Sit down at my feet’ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*” From the context, it is clear that James is describing a meeting (“your assembly”—*synagoge*), of the church on the Lord’s Day worship (a regular church service).

Early on (remember, this epistle was written about 15 years after Jesus ascended into heaven), Christians met in the synagogues. As the divide between Judaism and Christianity began to grow, Christians faced more and more persecution from the Jewish religious establishment. The stoning of Stephen turned tension into violence. Converts from Judaism who were following Jesus, now began to meet in homes, adopting many of the worship practices and governmental structures directly from the synagogue. Homes of well-established wealthy families had large courtyards and atriums, with room for a hundred or more people to assemble. James is still speaking of this early worship using language drawn directly from the synagogue—which I take to be important evidence for an early date for this epistle.

In any case, when these early churches assembled in someone’s home on the Lord’s Day for worship, visitors (strangers, or members from other Christian churches) and new converts would enter.² The reference to a “gold-ring” is an obvious reference to someone of high-standing in Roman society. “Fine clothes” is related to “shining” clothing, language which elsewhere in the New Testament is used of the clothing of angels and heavenly beings (cf. Acts 10:30; Revelation 15:6).³ The point is that the person would be easily and immediately recognized as someone of high-standing and importance based solely upon their appearance. As for the person in shabby clothing, James uses a word similar to the word he used in 1:21 to describe the kind of filthiness that we are to stripping off. This is a person who is dirty, poor, disheveled, and no doubt, a bit ripe. The image which comes to our mind, is that of a homeless person—someone we’ve seen in our community asking for a handout.⁴ It is immediately apparent that this person is struggling, has little, and can contribute nothing to the church.

Given sinful human nature, our first inclination is to offer the person of high-standing a good seat in a good location. A good location in an assembly like that would be one near the front (so that they could hear in a crowded room) or near an opening, such as a window for ventilation, or even in the shade, where it would not be so hot. Meanwhile the poor person is asked to stand in the back of the room (where it was difficult to hear and oppressively warm), or else they were asked to sit at the feet of others, a very humiliating sign of their low-standing. In effect, making the person in shabby clothes stand at the back, or sit at other’s feet, is to demonstrate complete disdain for their low standing, while showing favoritism to the person of high standing. James asks those who do such a thing to carefully consider their actions. *Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

James’ point is simply that Christians (those who have faith in the Lord of glory) act like non-Christians

² Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 108.

³ Moo, *The Epistle of James*, 103.

⁴ Moo, *The Epistle of James*, 103.

when they make rash distinctions about people solely on the basis of mere appearance. The result is that they are actually discriminating against people in their own assembly—their fellow Christians. To divide brothers and sisters in Christ on the basis of their social status and appearance is to place oneself in the position of a judge, when such a right belongs to God alone. To do this is a manifestation of evil thoughts which Christians are supposed to be stripping off like dirty clothes. This is to act contrary to faith in the Lord of glory, who has died for all his people (rich or poor) and who has called his people from all stations in life to faith in Christ. To divide God's people on the basis of mere appearance is sinful, and James' readers must stop all such practices immediately.

But James follows this exhortation with a helpful word of explanation. The answer is found in the doctrine of election. In verses 5-7, James writes, "*Listen, my beloved brothers, 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? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?*" There is much here that we must unpack.

In verse 5, James tells us that human discrimination based upon mere appearance cannot be squared with the doctrine of election. God chooses those whom he will save, and then brings them forth through the word (this is very similar to Paul's doctrine of "calling"). God chooses to save particular individuals based upon reasons known only to himself. The fact is that God chooses to save both rich *and* poor. As James reminds his reader, the irony in this is that it is God himself who chooses the poor, and then makes them rich in faith.

The paradox between God's ways and sinful human judgments is intentional and obvious. It is God who chooses to save many from among the poor to be partakers of his kingdom and heirs to all of his glorious promises. If the poor trust Christ and love God, it is not because they are poor (James is not a liberation theologian!), but because they have been chosen by God to have faith in Christ. By choosing both rich and poor and then forming them into one body (a church) God is showing that he is actively undoing the effects of sin upon human society. In choosing both rich and poor, God is doing what no sinful human society can do—uniting different people from different races, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds, into one body. Since God has chosen these poor among them to be rich in faith, and to enter his kingdom, how can their fellow Christians discriminate against them because they are poor? To do so is sin, plain and simple.

Despite those who read this passage through the lens of "Jesus the revolutionary," James never condemns wealth, nor the wealthy, *because* they are wealthy. But James reminds his audience that while it is a human desire to honor the rich—because the rich might somehow favor them—the reality is that the rich are the ones creating the difficulties those to whom James is writing were then experiencing. The wealthy have been able to use the system to their benefit. They are the ones exploiting the poor. Whether these are rich Christians, who use their wealth so as to escape the trials then being experienced by the poor, or whether this is a reference to unbelieving Jewish landowners and merchants (a different group of wealthy folk than those attending Christian assemblies) who have discriminated against the poor because of the poor's allegiance to Christ, we cannot really tell. But James does say that the rich blaspheme the very same name of Jesus, through whom the elect poor have been called to faith. In this case, James says, the rich do this through their exploitation of the poor.

As we come to verses 8-13, James goes even further in explaining why this discrimination against the poor is so wrong—it is a violation of the law of God. This discussion, in turn, leads James into a general discussion about the law, and that sets the stage for his discussion of justification, in verses 14-26 (our subject, next time, Lord willing).

If the shabby treatment of the poor is wrong because God loves the poor who trust in Christ, now James reminds his reader that this behavior is a violation of God’s law. In verses 8-9, James writes “*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.*” Again when James cites from the law, the reference is to the Ten Commandments (as in our Old Testament lesson) but now as interpreted through the lens of the coming of Christ, who fulfilled those same commandments through his perfect obedience.

Thus James’ can contend that if you *really* kept the law (which you can’t, but Christ did) you would love your neighbor. Clearly, James speaks of this in terms of the familiar blessing/curse principle—if you love your neighbor (in this case by not discriminating against them), you are doing well. But if you discriminate, you are sinning. James speaks of the law as the “royal law,” which likely is James’ way of speaking of the Ten Commandments as fulfilled in Jesus’ obedience, and now reinterpreted and affirmed in Jesus’ ethical teaching throughout the gospels.⁵ James’ point again is that Christians are to follow Jesus’ example in loving our neighbors. Christians obey this commandment to love their neighbor, by not discriminating or showing favoritism. In obeying the law, they are not seeking to be justified. Rather they are already justified (they have faith in the Lord of glory), and because they are already justified, they must seek to follow the example and command of Jesus, and not favor the rich, nor discriminate against the poor. If they do this, they are doing well.

No doubt, verses 10-11 are very critical in understanding James’ view of the purpose of the law in the life of a Christian. James has just told us in verse 9 that if we show partiality, we sin. This means that the law exposes us to be transgressors (law-breakers). Now we learn that to sin even one time means that we are regarded by God as a “law-breaker.” Says James, “*for whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.*” The law is a unit. The commandments not only reflect the very character of God, but they stand or fall together. And anyone who breaks even one of the commandments (adultery, murder, discriminating) is as guilty as if they had broken all of them. As one old preacher put it, the law is like a ten-link chain when it comes to justification. Remove or break but a single link, and the entire chain is useless and can no longer justify us. In this case, sin but a single time, and you cannot be justified by law. If you sin but a single time, you are regarded as a transgressor of the law. And you come under God’s curse.

In light of the fact that everyone in this room must (in that sense) be regarded as a transgressor, why then should we still strive to obey the law? James answers that question in verses 12-13. “*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.*” The only way James can now speak of the same law which condemns us as a “law of liberty,” is if that same law has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ so that the penalty for law-breaking has been removed through Christ’s sacrificial death and perfect obedience. For those who have faith in the Lord of glory, the law has been transformed from a standard of

⁵ Moo, The Epistle of James, 112.

condemnation (because of our failure to perfectly obey the law), into a law of liberty which reveals to us the will of God (because Jesus Christ has fulfilled that law). Instead of acting like law-breakers, we are to act as those who have been set free to obey the law. We are to do what we've heard.

Those who show favoritism, or discriminate, act without mercy. They will be shown no mercy. But to those who obey the law—again not to gain something from God, but because they already have faith in the Lord of glory—will be shown mercy, because mercy triumphs over judgment. Because Christ has fulfilled the law for us, and in our place, and because he has died for our every infraction of his law, mercy has *already* triumphed over judgment! This means we are free to obey! We are free to hear and then to do!

And so when James' readers show mercy to the poor, and don't favor the rich, they give demonstrable evidence of their trust in that one (the Lord of glory) who has fulfilled the law, thereby transforming it from a standard of condemnation into the royal law which Christians are now free to obey.⁶ While we are transgressors of the law, we remain under God's curse and judgment. But when we trust in Jesus—who has died for our sins, and who was raised for our justification—mercy triumphs over our sin because Jesus has already suffered our judgment. Once we trust in him, the law becomes our delight. And because we have faith in that same Lord of glory who was judged for us upon the cross, we are to *"speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty."*

⁶ See Moo's discussion of this: Moo, [The Epistle of James](#), 116-118.