

James 2:1-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/jas/jas-2/james-21-4/>

James rebukes his audience for showing favoritism toward the wealthy believers in their midst, while mistreating the poor brethren. Playing favorites is sinful.

By using parables and metaphors, James has just finished describing a few objective ways for his audience to evaluate their spiritual growth, to measure whether their actions are consistent with a maturing faith.

Here in Chapter 2, James uses a couple of examples to contrast living faith and dead faith, faith that is not active and working. These examples seem to be drawn from problems among some of the believers to whom he is writing. In explaining principles of obedience versus failure to obey, it likewise appears James is addressing some real-life issues among the believers in Jesus, particularly in the realm of *favoritism* and failure to help those in need.

The recipients of this letter are the members of the twelve tribes of Israel who are dispersed abroad (James 1:1). The Greek root-history of our English word ‘disperse’ comes from the Greek word “diaspora.” In James 1:1, “diaspora” is translated to English as “dispersed.”

James is writing specifically to his Jewish brothers who had believed in Jesus as the Messiah, as he makes clear by calling himself “a bond-servant of the Lord Jesus Christ” and by identifying his readers as “my brethren” (James 1:2). It is likely that these believers had been dispersed due to persecution (James 1:2).

The main message in this letter is a constant appeal to reject evil in thought and practice while living a life which is pleasing in God’s sight, marked by listening to God and others. James urges believers to ingest God’s word and set aside self (James 1:21). This allows believers to live by doing the truth.

To have the word “implanted” allows us to know the truth. What remains then is to do what is true; to “prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22). Every moment of our lives is a chance to live out God’s word, or to be merely hearers who do not do what they know to do.

Here in Chapter 2, James calls out a disgraceful example of some believers choosing to act on their own selfish desires, rather than serve others:

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism (v. 1).

James asserted in Chapter 1 that the source of temptation in our lives is our own flesh, our inner “desires.” The fact that James repeatedly addresses his audience as *My brethren* should not be overlooked. He makes special effort to emphasize that his readers are his *brethren*. These are believers, and what James will subsequently chastise them about does not reflect their new identity as *brethren*.

James tells them not to *hold their faith in Jesus with an attitude of personal favoritism*. This shows it is possible for believers to both have *faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ* and also fail to live out His example. To act towards others with *personal favoritism* is not consistent with the command from Jesus to love one another. We are supposed to love and serve one another.

While on earth, Jesus modeled servitude to God and to the people around Him (Mark 10:45). Believers are exhorted to choose to adopt the same mindset (Philippians 2:5-8). James is addressing Jewish believers, *brethren*, people who have *faith in Christ*, while pointing out behavior that is certainly not *Christ-like*, and which does not align with the *faith they hold in Jesus*. James exhorts believers to exercise their faith through obedience, that it might be a living faith.

James describes a situation, probably a real situation which had been reported to him happening among one of the assemblies of believers to whom he is writing. The situation is clear-cut, an example of *personal favoritism*. He describes two men who are essentially complete opposites in appearance:

For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes (v. 2).

Both of these men have come *into your assembly*, meaning they are attending a gathering of believers. The word for *assembly* here is actually “synagogue” which means “a bringing together.” Synagogues were traditionally the local community centers and places of worship in each town in Israel (and in Greek cities where dispersed Jews lived). A synagogue was where the scriptures were taught and expounded upon by Jewish rabbis.

Since James’s epistle is believed to be the earliest church letter, and because he is writing to Jewish believers, it would make sense that he use “synagogue” to describe the assembly of believers in Christ, though he might not be referring to an actual Jewish synagogue.

We see in Paul’s journeys that he initially visited the local synagogue in each town. In most towns, the Jews rejected him. But in Berea they received him, at least initially (Acts 17:11). So these Jews might have met in a synagogue building or in house assemblies.

The Jewish leadership rejected Christ as their Messiah, and took the nation with them (Matthew 27:22; Romans 11:9-10). However, not all have rejected. The Christian church was founded by Jews, the gospel was spread by Jews, and James is writing to these earliest of believers who are Jewish.

But it is possible that James is describing an actual synagogue; the leader of the synagogue in Corinth believed in Christ (Acts 18:8). As time went on, it would become common to use the Greek word “ekklesia” to describe local groups of believers; “ekklesia” means “gathering” or “assembly” and is usually translated as “church.”

Here in James’s example, two men with opposite social statuses enter *your assembly*, into a meeting of believers. One man is obviously wealthy: he has a *gold ring* on his finger *and is dressed in fine clothes*. The other man is obviously no one special by worldly standards: *a poor*

man in dirty clothes. Not just *poor*, but *dirty*, offensive to the eye.

James details the way in which the believers in the assembly treat these two contrasting men: *you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place"* (v. 3).

The rich man gets *special attention*. People are leaping to their feet to greet him, to welcome him, to flatter him. He is given *a good place to sit*, the best seat in the house, probably the front row so that everyone can see him and his *gold ring* and his *fine clothes*.

But for the *poor man*, *you say, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool"* (v. 3). The *poor man in dirty clothes* must *stand over* somewhere, in the back of the room perhaps, or, if he is to sit, he can sit on the floor: *down by my footstool*. Down at the feet of someone who is given a real chair.

James—having described the way the believers have treated a rich man (he gets the best seat) and a poor man (he gets the worst, or no seat at all)—then shows his readers where they have failed to live out their *faith*:

have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? (v. 4).

The way the *brethren* have treated these two men seems to make sense by material, earthly metrics. The rich man with flashy jewelry and clothes is attractive, and makes the rest of us look good, so he should be put on display in *a good seat*. The *poor man in dirty clothes* is unpleasant to look at, embarrassing to have in our midst, so let us sweep him to the wall or at the foot of someone's chair, out of sight, out of mind. One man has more value than the other.

These worldly *distinctions* are *evil*, says James. He explains to these *brethren* that since they are making *distinctions among* themselves, serving and loving one man for his wealth while shaming the other man for his poverty, they have become *judges with evil motives*.

What are the *evil motives*? It is inferred that people are treating the wealthy man with deference because they perceive that he might do something for them. Those with wealth and position can grant favors. They can use their influence to gain us benefit. This would mean that the motivation for their behavior stems from selfish ambition. This is what Paul in his letter to the Romans says about what God thinks of behavior that stems from selfish ambition, and how He will reward such behavior in the day of judgment:

“but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil.”

(Romans 2:8-9a)

Thus, a motive of selfish ambition is something God considers *evil*. For something to be *evil* means for it to be outside of God's (good) design for the world. God designed the world to operate in harmony and mutual service. When we are selfishly ambitious we are seeking to exploit others. God's desire is for us to love and serve others. Both the wealthy man as well as

the poor man undoubtedly have needs. The goal should be to serve them, not to extract from them.

In the following passage, James will examine his readers on their *evil motives* and show them that not only do their *motives* go against the *Lord Jesus Christ*, but that these *distinctions* do not make any sense with an eternal perspective. These *motives* are not in line with the truth, they are not in line with God's (good) design. This kind of *personal favoritism* is to identify ourselves with the kingdom of man rather than the kingdom of God. We are seeking to exploit rather than to love. We are communicating that we care what men think, not what God thinks (Proverbs 29:25-26, 1 John 2:15).

Biblical Text

¹ My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ² For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³ and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine 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," ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?