

5. Learning to Treat the Poor with Respect

In our last topic, we saw that one of the ways we practice obedience to the Lord is by ministering to the poor and the needy. In this topic, we will see that the Lord used James to give us further instructions about the way we minister to the poor. Many churches ignore the poor and make little or no effort to reach out to share the Gospel with them. That is not the desire of the Lord for our lives. Instead, the Lord wants us to have a great concern for the poor. In our topic today, we will see that we want to show our physical and spiritual children, by our example, how to treat the poor with respect.

We begin by seeing what the Lord says about partiality. James 2:1 says, “My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, *the Lord* of glory, with partiality.” Here, we see that we are encouraged to avoid one thing in our practice of Christianity in our daily lives. We see that we are to avoid partiality. The word that is translated “partiality” speaks of *treating one person with respect and not treating another person with the same respect because of appearance, wealth or for some other reason*. The word is used four times in the New Testament. We will look at each of the other uses of the word.

We see that God shows the same respect for all people. In talking about the judgment of the Jews and Gentiles, Romans 2:11-12 says, “For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law.” Colossians 3:23-25 talks about the consequences of good choices and the consequences of sinful choices. Those verses say, “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.” God does not show partiality with either good consequences or bad consequences.

Ephesians 6:5-9 says, “Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether *he is* a slave or free. And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.” If we are bondservants, we are to work to please the Lord and do the will of the Lord. If we are masters, we are also to work to please the Lord and do the will of the Lord. We are not to threaten others but realize that the Lord is our Master and He does not show partiality by threatening any Christian.

Based on these principles, the Lord gives an illustration of two different people coming into a gathering of Christians. James 2:2-4 says, “For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ and say to the poor man, ‘You stand there,’ or, ‘Sit here at my footstool,’ have you not shown

partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” Here, we see that the Lord says we are not to show partiality because of wealth or outward appearance. This is why it is so important for us to show our children, by our own example, the importance of treating all people with respect.

In these verses, James warns against showing favoritism to people of the congregation, or to visitors at a church service, by paying attention to a rich man wearing fine clothes and expensive jewelry yet shaming a poor man in ragged clothes by making him stand or sit on the floor. In many parts of the world today, this same thing is done to whole sections of a city. Churches will reach out to the sections of the city where people have nice homes yet ignore the people who live in the poor sections and slums of the city.

When Christians do such things, God asks the question in verse four, “Have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” Here, we see that God describes such acts of favoritism by two phrases. God says that such actions show partiality. The word that is translated “partiality” in this verse speaks of separating *oneself or showing discrimination*. Peter was challenged, in Acts 11:2, after he went to the house of Cornelius. Acts 11:2-3 says, “And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, ‘You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!’ In Acts 11:12, Peter answered, “Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house.” Here, we see that God showed both Peter, and the leaders of the church at Jerusalem, that they were not to show partiality against the Gentiles.

Second, God asked if we have become judges with evil thoughts. A judge is a person who passes judgment on something. The word that is translated “thoughts” speaks about the thinking or reasoning of a person within himself. As a result, a person with evil or wicked thoughts has filled his thinking with evil thoughts about others and is using those thoughts to judge others. Matthew 15:19-20 says, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are *the things* which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.” Here, we see that God places partiality along with every other form of sin and points out that partiality is just as evil as these other sins.

James 2:5-7 says, “Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?” James wanted to help the Jewish Christians learn to treat the Gentiles, and the poor, with the same love and respect Christ showed. The word that is translated “listen” means *to hear so that there is understanding that leads to action*.

God wants us to understand that He has chosen the poor. The word that is translated “poor” here speaks of *those who lack wealth, influence, position or honor*. The word is also used to speak of the *needy, the helpless, and the powerless*. It can speak of those who lack worldly education or culture. 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 says, “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise

according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.” Here, we see that God does not show partiality to the rich and the powerful. Instead, God also chooses those people who the rich or powerful people often reject.

God looks at the hearts of people. We see that many of the poor are rich in faith. Those who are rich in faith are rich in Christian character and are seeking eternal rewards. Hebrews 11:9-10 says of Abraham, “By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God.” Here, we see that Abraham was focused on his eternal inheritance instead of his worldly wealth. These are the people who love the Lord instead of loving the things of this world. As a result, they can look forward to eternal rewards.

James went on to tell how the rich people of the world treated the poor. In addition, even some of the Christians had this same attitude toward the poor. God described the way the rich treat the poor by listing two common actions of the rich. First, the rich often oppress the poor and take them to court. The word that is translated “oppress” means *to exercise harsh control over another person or to use one’s power against a person*. The only other place this word is used in the New Testament is in Acts 10:38, where we read, “How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.” Here, we see that the oppression of the rich and the oppression of the devil are the two ways that this word is used in the New Testament. The rich oppress the poor by taking them to court to take away what little they do have.

Second, we see that the rich often blaspheme the noble name by which Christians are called. The word that is translated “noble” means *that which is good in its character and beneficial in its effects*. Sometimes, this word is used to refer to a person. The noble name by which Christians are called is the name of Christ. Acts 11:26 says, “And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” The word “Christians” means *little Christs*. It was probably a name that was given to try to mock Christians, because they were becoming like Christ. Instead, it is a privilege to be honored by saying that we are becoming like Christ.

We want to help our physical and spiritual children to develop the same respect that Christ had for the poor. That will only happen as we provide an example by our respect for the poor. May the Lord richly bless you as you show your physical and spiritual children how to treat the poor with respect.