

Goree Island, just off the coast of Senegal, West Africa, is the place where captured Africans were collected and shipped off to slavery in the New World. In July 2003 a powerful and humbling speech was made there. Here is a part of that speech made by President George W. Bush: “For 250 years the [African] captives endured an assault on their culture and their dignity. The spirit of Africans in America did not break. Yet the spirit of their captors was corrupted. Small men took on the powers and airs of tyrants and masters. Years of unpunished brutality and bullying...produced a dullness and hardness of conscience. Christian men and woman became blind to the clearest commands of their faith and added hypocrisy to injustice. A republic founded on equality for all became a prison for millions. And yet all the generations of oppression under the laws of man could not crush the hope of freedom and defeat the purposes of God,” said Bush.

The evils of slavery were accepted and unchanged for centuries. But eventually, the human heart would not abide them. There is a voice of conscience and hope in every man and woman that will not be silenced. We all need to hear God’s word concerning equality. In James 1 verse 26 James writes about worthless religion: “*Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.*” If we don’t keep a tight rein on our tongue, our Christianity is a sham. Jesus said, “*for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of*” (Matthew 12:34). Our tongue belies the truth about our hearts.

James adds at the end of verse 27, every Christian must “*keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*” He already said that true religion is about “*looking after orphans and widows in their distress,*” something that provokes liberal and conservative thinkers alike. To conservatives he says: Care about social justice and deeds of compassion. To liberals he says: Care about personal morality, honesty, fidelity, and purity. *It seems the apostle is saying that true religion—true Christianity—is motivated by a Christ-shaped heart of mercy.* Mercy will rein in the tongue when talking about people created in God’s

image. Mercy cares for the poor, the ones who can easily be taken advantage of and don't have any power to care for themselves. And mercy keeps itself free from the impurities of the world.

The main points of the chapter 2 passage before us today comes through three different verses and is said in three different ways, moving from the most specific to the most general. I'll give it to you in reverse order from the more general to the more specific:

- First in verse 12—*Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.*
- Then in verse 8—*Love your neighbor as yourself.*
- Then in verse 1—*Don't show favoritism to people for any reason.*

The rest of the passage is arguments from James that illustrate reasons why we should not show favoritism. Let's begin by taking up James' main point from verse 1.

1. Favoritism— “Favoritism” as James uses the word in verse 1 means that we are basing our treatment of others—our attitude toward someone else—on something that should *never* be the basis of how we treat anyone. So, as an example, James writes that how people are treated might be based on riches or poverty. He gives an illustration in verses 2-3: “*Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet.”*” This is precisely what James is describing as favoritism. Wealth or poverty should *not* be the basis of how we treat another person. Treating someone differently on the basis of their wardrobe or the kind of car they drive is blatant favoritism.

I think it's appropriate to apply James' teaching to race as well as riches. My reason for extending the apostle's teaching to ethnicity is because of the way the word “*favoritism*” is used in other places in the New Testament. I'll give you one example from Romans. In Romans 2, Paul is dealing with an ethnic

and religious issue, namely sharp differences between Gentiles and Jews. And he says that both are liable to judgment because of their sin. Then Paul gives the reason in verse 11: *“For God does not show favoritism.”* Paul uses the very same word in Romans 2 as we find here in James 2.

So, I think James and Paul would be happy for us to take this text that focuses on *favoritism* because of wealth and say that it also applies to *favoritism* because of ethnicity. In the Christian community good treatment and bad treatment, honor and dishonor, rejection and acceptance should not be based on riches or race.

2. The Law That Gives Freedom—We can see another word of explanation of James’ teaching in the words in verse 12: *“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.”* When we don’t discriminate against but love others as we love ourselves, we are acting according to *“the law that gives freedom.”* What do you imagine that law is? James doesn’t precisely define *“the law that gives freedom”* but he seems to treat it as common knowledge for those in the early church. So, I would recommend taking a definition partly from a verse in Galatians where the language is very similar. Galatians 5:13 says, *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”*

We believe that Christians are set free from their sins. We are forgiven and freed from the dominion and condemnation of sin. That also means we are to live in this freedom—forgiven, not condemned by God. Will that produce in us a kind of lawlessness? Both Paul and James answer NO. It produces love. For James the summary of the law that gives freedom is given in verse 8: *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* Remember that the implications of *“the law that gives freedom”* are stated by Paul in Galatians 5:13, *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”*

For both of these apostles loving action is the natural fruit and the necessary evidence of being justified by faith (Galatians 5:6; James 2:17). Love is the

kind of law that governs us when we are freed from condemnation by the blood and righteousness of Christ. And we will be judged under the law that gives freedom. If we have not loved, we will perish, because there will be no evidence that we are justified by grace through faith.

So, you can see that James and Paul put a favoritism based on wealth or ethnicity in the context of eternal judgment. This is not something we should treat lightly. How we treat others is evidence of our relation to Christ. If we have been set free from sin's dominion and condemnation by Christ's sacrifice, then we live in freedom. And in this freedom, there is a law—the law that gives freedom—in other words, the law of love. We will be judged under this law. And this law says, “Do not show favoritism on the basis of race or riches.”

3. Seven Reasons Why We Should Not Show Favoritism—The rest of the passage is James' argument in which we see seven reasons that he gives for not showing favoritism. I won't take time to deal with each of them, but I'll simply name them and then we'll briefly look at the last one and the first one.

1. Verse 1: Favoritism contradicts faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.
2. Verses 2-4: Favoritism reveals a judging heart and behind it, evil thoughts.
3. Verse 5: Favoritism toward the rich contradicts God's heart, because God has said in Proverbs 31:9, “*Defend the rights of the poor and needy.*”
4. Verse 6: Favoritism dishonors people created in the image of God.
5. Verses 6-7: Favoritism toward the rich backfires and becomes our downfall.
6. Verse 9-11: Favoritism makes us a “lawbreaker” of the law that intended to give us freedom.
7. Verse 13: Favoritism is not merciful. And if we fail to show mercy, we will be judged without mercy.

God is so good to us not merely to tell us what to do, as one with authority, but to tell us why. He has reasons. He wants us not only to submit, but to submit with an understanding of *why* we do what we do. He wants us to see the beauty and the wisdom and the goodness of his commands. Therefore, God shares with us reasons to do what he says for us to do.

4. Mercy, Not Judgment—Finally, let’s look more closely at James’ last and first reason. In verse 13 he says, “*Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*” The meaning seems fairly obvious. It echoes the words of Jesus: “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*” from Matthew 5:7. Who of us can withstand God’s judgment without mercy? If we don’t show mercy, we have not known Christ. A Christian is a person who has seen, experienced, and lives by the mercy of Christ. If there is no mercy in our lives—if we show favoritism because of wealth or ethnicity and feel no remorse or repentance—we don’t know Christ and we will perish. But if we have tasted God’s mercy and treasure it, and live in the freedom of his love, then we will show mercy, and that mercy will be evidence of our faith.

5. Christ’s Glory, Not Ours—This is why James begins where he does in verse 1 by addressing favoritism. He begins with faith in “*our glorious Lord Jesus.*” And this is where we end. He says in verse 1: “*My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.*” He emphasizes the word “glorious.” James chose to accent that Christians trust Christ the Lord of glory. Why? Because the origin of favoritism is either our craving for human glory (so we favor the rich and powerful), or our fear (so we become biased in favor of whoever we think will keep us safe). James’ point is this: If you know Christ as the glorious Lord Jesus—if you trust him as the one who is gloriously *strong* and gloriously *wise* and gloriously *loving*—then you won’t be controlled by a craving for human glory or by a fear that defaults to favoritism to obtain security. Christ will be our glory—all the glory we need. And Christ will be our security—all the security we need.

The issue of favoritism—whether because of riches or race—is an important issue in the lives of Jesus’ followers. Are we partial in our attitudes or actions? Or are we trusting “*our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?*” If we are, his glory will put us in the right place, and we will be secure in him. And from that humble and secure place will flow love, not favoritism. Mercy, not judgment. Amen.

(Thanks to John Piper for sermon points)