

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL LETTERS TO GOD’S PEOPLE THE GOD WHO DIRECTS HIS PEOPLE *Toward Mercy and Impartiality*

Mercy is the aspect of God’s love that causes Him to help the miserable; just as grace is the aspect of His love that moves Him to forgive the guilty. The old hymn At Calvary says, “mercy there was great and grace free, pardon there was multiplied to me. There my burdened soul found liberty at Calvary. As followers of Christ, we gratefully accept God’s love and mercy for ourselves and yet we often fail to be merciful and show God’s grace to others – most often those who are different from ourselves.

This lesson takes us to a portion of the New Testament letter written by James. James had a half-brother named Jesus (*Matthew 13:55*). Most agree that he was the one who wrote this letter. The author could not have been James, the brother of John, because he was the first of the twelve apostles to be put to death and already in heaven by this time. (*Acts 12:2*).

The lack of mercy and impartiality among early Christians caused James to address the problem in the letter he wrote. Unlike the letters of Paul which were written to specific congregations, James wrote his letter to Jewish Christians whether they were in Jerusalem or abroad. Chapter 2 of the letter warns against personal favoritism.

Treat everyone equally? How in the world can we do that? Oh, as believers, we are quick to admit that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. But, do we act that way? And probing even deeper, how do we feel in our hearts? Favoritism rears its ugly head in all aspects of our lives beginning within the family unit. The sin of favoritism was revealed in the Old Testament in the family of Isaac and Rebekah by the preferential treatment they gave their two sons, Esau and Jacob. Isaac favored Esau while Rebekah favored Jacob. Where does favoritism start? It starts in the heart. *Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)*<sup>9</sup> *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*

Jesus did not ‘play favorites.’ If we want to be like Jesus, we must treat everyone equally and to be honest that is not always easy. Jesus’ enemies said of Him in *Matthew 22:16 (ESV)*<sup>16</sup> *... and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.* Our Lord does not look at the outward appearance; He looks at the heart. When He walked this earth, He was not impressed with riches or social status. The poor widow who gave her mite (the smallest coin possible) was greater in His eyes than the rich Pharisee who boastfully gave his large donation. Furthermore, Jesus saw the potential in the lives of sinners. In Simon Peter who was often quick to judge and quick to deny, He saw a rock. In Matthew, the hated tax collector, He saw a faithful disciple who would one day write one of the four Gospels. Yes, in Judas, He saw a traitor but He loved him and still gave him the chance to change. His disciples were

amazed to see Jesus talking with the sinful woman at the well, but Jesus saw in her an instrument for reaping a great harvest.

Warren Wiersbe comments: We are prone to judge people by **their past, not their future**. When Saul of Tarsus was converted, the church in Jerusalem was afraid to receive him since in his past, he had been hunting down Christians. It took Barnabas, who believed that Saul (aka Paul) had a genuine conversion experience, to break down the walls prejudice. We are also prone to judge by outward appearance rather than by the inner attitude of the heart. Jesus was the Friend of sinners, though He disapproved of their sins. It was not compromise, but compassion, that caused Him to welcome them, and when they trusted Him, He forgive them.

America is currently experiencing the greatest divisions among its people we have witnessed in decades. Intolerance, scorn, and mockery for those who hold different opinions is rampant. We can be certain that our Savior is not pleased when His children act so much like the world that no one can see the difference in us. Acting with partiality is totally contrary to real faith in Jesus.

### **Ascribe the greater glory to Jesus Christ.**

**Read James 2:1-4 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.* <sup>2</sup> *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,* <sup>3</sup> *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,"* <sup>4</sup> *have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

James spoke of Jesus as the Lord of glory. This is a strong testament to the deity of Christ since James grew up in the same household as Jesus and yet recognized Him as the Lord of glory after His resurrection from the dead. James addressed the total community of believers -- the rich, the poor, the common people, high society, the low, the bond and free, the Jew and the Gentile, male and female reminding them and us that Jesus is Lord of all.

Churches sometimes "target" different groups as mission focuses. In many ways, this can be helpful to the kingdom of God; however, we must never allow targeting a particular group for Christ to cause us to forget exactly who Jesus targeted! **Luke 19:10 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*" Jesus' heart was filled with love for all mankind.

James used an illustration of the treatment of rich people compared to poor people. It is easy to picture the scene. There is a modern-day example you've most likely heard but it is the perfect complement for these words from James.

There was a young, intelligent university student named Bill. Bill was what some people call a "free spirit." He had wild long hair, always wore the same old and torn T-shirt, jeans and no shoes. Across the

street from the university campus was a conservative church. The people there were rich, older and well-dressed. They wanted to help the university students nearby, but they did not know exactly how to reach them. One day Bill decided to visit that church. He arrived dressed in his normal attire. The service had already started and was full, so Bill walked down the center aisle looking for a seat. People were getting more uncomfortable as they watched this unclean, wild-looking young man. Finally, Bill got to the front and saw there were no more empty seats, so he just sat down on the floor right in front of the preacher. By now, everyone was upset and distracted. Then, a respected old church deacon got up and started toward the front. Everyone was thinking: "He'll correct that disrespectful young man." They were surprised to see the old deacon drop his walking stick and very slowly sit down on the floor next to this ill-dressed young man. He did not want him to sit alone and feel unaccepted. The people in the church were moved to tears. Finally, the preacher said: "What I am preaching about today you will probably never remember. But what you have just seen you will never forget!"

James warns those who *become judges with evil thoughts*. If we are honest, we all can be susceptible to this – become a judge with evil thoughts since no one knows what we are thinking, but the Lord knows!. As Christians, we need to give others the benefit of the doubt, look to what they can do in the future not what they've done in the past, and if we are truly to be like Jesus, our heart must yearn to be a servant to all.

### **Acknowledge the upside down nature of God's kingdom.**

*Read James 2:5-7 (ESV)* <sup>5</sup> 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? <sup>6</sup> But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? <sup>7</sup> Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

America tends to equate financial wealth with the blessings of God. Consider what Job of the Old Testament said after he had lost everything. **Job 1:21 (ESV)** <sup>21</sup> And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

James said, *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.*

I have used this illustration before but it fits too well not to repeat it. My Mother knew a poor, elderly, black woman many years ago when Mother worked in a small grocery store in Alexander, Arkansas. It was a time when you could put in an order and have the groceries delivered to your home. As this elderly woman unpacked her groceries, she discovered an item she had not bought. She immediately walked to the grocery store in the blazing summer sun to return the item (a bottle of Karo syrup). Upon her arrival at the store, she was told, "You didn't have to return that item or you could have even sent it back the next time." She said, "I'm a child of the King, and I don't have to steal." This woman though poor by the world's standards knew that she was rich as a Child of the King and desired to live right in the eyes of her King! God Himself has promised His kingdom to those who love Him.

We must also remember that being poor is not an automatic ticket into heaven – Jesus shed His precious blood to purchase our ticket into heaven. **Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup> *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,* <sup>9</sup> *not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Many Christians are offended when we hear people “taking the Lord’s name in vain.” However, James’ words about those *who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called*, remind us that disparaging the name of our Lord Jesus Christ involves more than vulgar language. When we treat people unfairly because of their social status, we are in reality taking the name of Jesus in vain. I have a suspicion that when we treat people wrong for any reason, we are misusing the name of Jesus.

### **Act in a manner consistent with our future.**

**Read James 2:8-13 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup> *If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.* <sup>9</sup> *But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.* <sup>10</sup> *For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.* <sup>11</sup> *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.* <sup>12</sup> *So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.* <sup>13</sup> *For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

James quoted the royal law (*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*) from the Old Testament. (**Lev. 19:18**) It is the royal law because it was given to us by the King of kings. And like the woman who returned that bottle of Karo so many years ago, we too are children of the King!

Jesus Himself reminded us of the Law that God gave to Moses could be summed up into one concise principle—to love God with all the heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (**Matthew 22:37–40**).

We like to believe that there are degrees of sin but in the holy eyes of God sin is sin. Throughout the Bible we find that it is not necessary to break every commandment of the law in order to stand condemned as a criminal in the sight of God. To offend in one point is to be guilty of all. James reminds us that showing favoritism or partiality condemns us as sinners like adultery or murder. But that condemning law, so terrible to the sinner, becomes the law of liberty to those who accept the matchless grace of Jesus.

As children of Royal King we need to guard our thoughts as well as our actions towards others. As objects of God’s mercy, we are called to show mercy and compassion to those around us, no matter how low or how high their positions in society may be. Remember James says, “*mercy triumphs over judgment.*”