

## **IS EVERYONE REALLY WELCOME?**

**James 2:1–13**

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Rather than reading this passage in its entirety at the beginning, I'd like to sort of pick our way through it as we see what it is saying to us today. I'm going to speak on the theme, "Is Everyone Really Welcome?"

We often misjudge other people's motives; we simply don't know what's in a person's heart.

Our tendency so often is to cast judgment on a person for what they say or do, or because of some external factor or some outward appearance. We simply don't know what's going on inside a person. But we make those external kinds of judgments.

James has a word for us, as he addresses the problem of prejudice, the problem of making superficial judgments and the like. He says appearance is not necessarily an indicator of what is lying in an individual's heart. As we look at these thirteen verses in James 2, we'll see that in verse 1 a principle is set forth. In verses 2–4, the illustration is given. In verses 5–11, there are three reasons given for why the principle is a valid principle. And the last two verses (James 2:12–13) give the conclusion to that particular segment of the Word.

**I. Let's look first at the principle. "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism" (James 2:1, NIV).**

That's the principle. Don't show partiality. This is a Greek phrase which literally means "to receive by face." That is, when you receive a person by face, you're judging them on the basis of the color of their skin or the length of their hair or the kind of clothes they wear or the sort of academic credentials they carry or their economic status. James is telling believers, "Don't receive people on the basis of external things like that. We cannot judge a person on the basis of

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externals.” That is our standard of conduct because it’s God’s standard of conduct. He is no respecter of persons. He doesn’t show partiality. Therefore, He wants that trait in we who are His people.

There’s a vivid illustration of this in the Old Testament, 1 Samuel 16, when God rejected Saul and told Samuel to go anoint a successor. Samuel comes to the family of Jesse. The sons of Jesse, the brothers of David, all line up. Samuel’s eyes land on the first one, which I’m sure was the tallest and the handsomest, the biggest. As so often is the case, leaders are selected by their physical appearance. We go by looks. We like the looks of the person who is more magisterial. Samuel thought that. He looked like a king. The Lord said to Samuel, “Don’t judge on the basis of his appearance, of his stature, because I have rejected him. God does not see as man sees. Man looks on the outward appearance but God looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

The people that God draws to Him are not necessarily tall, dark and handsome. But it doesn’t mean God has excluded you on the basis of your good looks. Just don’t presume that those good looks are why God likes you. God not only draws the tall, the dark, and the handsome to Him. Many of us are short and shapeless. And God loves us as well. He is not impressed by external factors. He’s impressed by the attitude of the heart.

There has been a movement the last few years, the church growth movement, in which they study principles to growing churches. Then they issue books and reports for pastors and leaders to help them understand that these are the principles that work; and if you do these, your church will grow. I think most of the principles that are drawn come straight out of the Scripture. But the one principle that absolutely drives me up a wall—and I know in many cases is true, I don’t like it but in many cases is true—is the rule they call the “homogenous unit principle” which simply says that if a church is going to grow, it needs to appeal to people who have the same likes on the

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basis of “birds of a feather flock together.” So you can’t mix the Archie Bunkers with the university professors. And if you’re going to reach the Archie Bunker, you’ve got to have an Archie Bunker church. And if you’re going to reach the university professor, you’ve got to have a university professor church.

I know that’s the case, because all of us like to hang around with friends. But just because that may be the case sociologically, it doesn’t mean that that has to be the case theologically. That’s not the way it is to be ecclesiastically—that is, in reference to the doctrine of the church. Church isn’t just a collection of people who look like one another, who like one another and all think the same way. Church is something far wider and more diverse and beautiful than that. God calls the church to be a microcosm of the world to which it ministers. If the community is a microcosm of a particular set of people, then the church is to mirror that microcosm.

Jesus was complimented, even by His enemies, for never showing partiality. They said to Him in Matthew 22:16, “You aren’t swayed by man, because You pay no attention to who they are.”

Our friendship associations, as valuable as friendships are to us, can never become closed groups where we shut others out. It is the Christian’s perspective on life to be inclusive rather than exclusive. There is a no more clannish group in the world than a group of sixth graders or senior highers; when you find a group that you groove with, it becomes difficult for somebody coming in from the outside to fit and belong. When birds of a different feather are in our church body, go for them, as much as if we went for somebody who we thought would register with us.

In verse 1, “as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ”—which is James’ way of saying that, in the presence of the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, it is unthinkable to imagine the kind of scene that will unfold in verses 2–4. Since he is no respecter of persons, it ought not to be in His church.

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### **II. The principle, “Don’t show partiality,” in verses 2–4, is illustrated out of a scene in the Early Church.**

“Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby 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,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:2–4, NIV).

I wanted to translate this for teenagers. I don’t know what kids are wearing these days, what’s in. I went to my son, a senior in high school. I said, “Tell me the brand names. What’s in that you’ve got to wear to be in the in group.” He said, “That’s not the way we think. We don’t judge a person on the basis of what we look like. Just come in whatever you’re comfortable with. The fact that people have a difficult time getting into a group is not related to clothes at all. The people who have a difficult time getting into a group are the clingers.” I said, “What is a clinger?” He said, “A clinger is someone who just has to have the group. They don’t have enough on their own personality to stand. They’ve just got to cling to you. They have a rough time getting in.” This Scripture says, “Receive the clingers!”

One of my giant heroes of the Christian life is E. S. Williams. The last time I talked to him, he was ninety-four years of age. I asked him, “What do you see of the church? Are there any warning signals? Anything you’d point out that I should be concerned about?” He said, “If I have one great fear, it’s that the church will become a social organization. I see this happening more and more—that we tend to become social rather than emphasize our spiritual mission. I understand how it happens. When we become Christians and the Lord shapes our personality, we find it easy to have friends and we love other Christians. We can get very cozy and very

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comfortable. All of a sudden, we can have so many social things going on that we forget what our spiritual mission is.”

I think that’s part of the problem that James is addressing here. There was a social bonding going on, which sort of excluded people who were different. The church is meant to be inclusive and not exclusive. Everyone is welcome.

And, by the way, verse 2 is telling us that the Early Church had its problems. It was not a perfect church. In fact, this letter is so early, when you read verse 2 you get a clue. We use the word “meeting” in the modern translation. But the word in the Greek is “Suppose a man comes into your *synagogue*.” Here the church is at such an early point of its history, it’s not even yet being called the church. It’s being called the “synagogue.” It was already having problems between the rich and the poor.

I might note that, if it’s possible, to discriminate against the poor in the Early Church, it’s just as possible in the contemporary church to have an inverted snobbery, where the wealthy are judged and we do not welcome the rich as we welcome the poor. If someone drives a battered Volkswagen, we say, “They must be spiritual.” But if they drive a new Mercedes, we may say, “Their heart is cold and away from God.” But it’s not a matter of what car you drive or what house you live in. We ought not to be judging one another on those standards.

### **III. Verses 5–11 explain the principle and give us three reasons why we are not to judge superficially.**

**A.** First, that is not the way God judges, verse 5: “Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?” God has chosen the poor. Jesus says this on the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). That is, recognize that those who get into

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the kingdom of God are those who say, “I have nothing on my own to beg, borrow or buy my way into the kingdom of God. It is a matter of fact that the economic poor often find it easier to say that than the economic rich. So the church in the first century was made up of many of the poor. Therefore, can that church have the right to reject someone who God has chosen? If a poor brother walks in, do they have the right to reject him whom God has chosen?”

The church has faced two great dangers over the years. One is that it will draw its circle of relationships in the church smaller than the circle Christ has drawn. Or it might draw the circle bigger than the circle Christ has drawn. If it draws it smaller, it might say, “We know what the New Testament says about the requirements of being a Christian, but in addition to those requirements, we have our own requirements.” There are some churches not even Billy Graham could be a member of, because he couldn’t sign off on some of the doctrinal points. A church ought not to be smaller than the circle Christ has drawn.

Neither should it be larger. The church ought not to reject whom Christ has accepted. And the church ought not to accept whom Christ has rejected. Let the circles between the invisible and the visible churches be one and the same. “God does not judge,” James says, “according to this external standard, and neither ought we.” He has chosen on the basis of hunger for Him.

**B.** Then the second reason why we are not to show partiality is that that is how the world judges. Verses 6–7, “But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?” (NIV). Here we have a situation described where you have the rich oppressing the poor. In those days, there was no middle class. Someone has said that you have the application of the Golden Rule: “Them that’s got the gold makes the rules.” They were taking it out of the hides of the poor of which many of the church were made up.

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James is saying the church needs to be different in society. It is in the church that the rich man and the poor man sit down together. In fact, the poor man might even be in a place of spiritual authority over the wealthier person, because the church is the great leveler, where class or social distinction or economic status doesn't mean a single thing. James is saying, "If the church starts paying attention to social class, it's losing its unique character as God's society in the world. So don't judge like the world."

C. The third reason he's giving for us not to show partiality is that, to show partiality is contrary to the command of Scripture.

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker" (James 2:8–11, NIV).

James is saying we all live by the royal law if we're Christians. The royal law is the law that is given by a king, and the people who live by it, want to live in a royal manner. So we have a royal law given by a king, and since we are the king's subjects, we're to live in a royal kind of way.

Therefore, the conduct and the motivation by which we live is significantly different from those who cling together on the basis of external things rather than spiritual matters.

That's the kind of love we often see on display. If the object of our love is young and pretty and clever or handsome, then they naturally evoke a response of love. But what if the object looks like a bale of hay? Do we really see here what James is saying? If we have truly received Jesus as the Lord of our life, there will be a difference. We will be motivated by His love to reach out

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to people, even if they are not our kind of people, even if they don't wear the right clothes or wear their hair the way we like or have the kind of background we prefer.

Verses 10–11, picking up this theme, deal with the tendency to rationalize and say, “But James, I may show favoritism, but I haven't done anything bad, like commit adultery or commit murder.” James is reminding us that to be indicted by the law on one count is to be in violation of the entire law. And therefore, to be an offender before the court.

Verses 12–13 give a word of conclusion, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (NIV). James is saying the same thing as his elder brother, Jesus, said. If we don't show mercy towards other people, if we don't accept people as God accepts them, then we ourselves have not really accepted the mercy of God.

Our mercy doesn't have any purchasing power with God. It's not because we have mercy that we gain God's favor. Our mercy is evidential. It shows evidence that we understand the basis of our own acceptance with God.

Jesus tells the parable of the two debtors in Matthew 18. The guy who owed millions, who was forgiven. And somebody owed him pennies, but he refused to forgive. Jesus said he was thrown into prison. Jesus warns us that the heavenly Father will treat each of us that way, unless we forgive our brother from the heart. That is, unless we practice mercy and acceptance towards other people.

One of my favorite passages in all of Scripture is Acts 16. It is the story of the planting of the first church in Europe, the church at Philippi, Greece. That chapter tells us who the first three charter members were. The first was a lady named Lydia, who was a seller of purple from Thyatira. That tells us a lot all by itself. Sellers of purple were people who dealt with the upper

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classes. Purple was an upper class cloth. “From Thyatira”—tells us she was Asiatic in culture.

And the fact that she had a home big enough to house the apostolic mission of four people—Paul and his company—tells us that she had means. She was living in a villa, not a utility apartment.

She opens her heart to the Lord and becomes the first believer in the church.

The next person that comes along is this little Greek girl, unnamed. We’re not told she is Greek, but we assume it. She had a spirit of divination and her prophetic powers, which came under demonic oppression, had been prostituted for the gain of someone else. She was from the lower dregs of society. She had no finances. All the money she’d ever made in life had gone towards somebody else. She was uneducated and uncouth and uncultured. There she was, against regal courtly patrician, Lydia. An ignorant poor, unnamed. That girl becomes the second person placed in the body.

Then the third person is a Roman jailer, who has got to be strictly middle class. He’s of a different racial stock. Lydia is Asiatic. He’s Roman. The girl’s probably Greek. There are three different cultures represented. The Roman jailer doesn’t have the economic means of Lydia. But he’s not poor like the little girl. So there are three different economic classes. And they’re different in their tastes. I’d think that on a Saturday night the Roman jailer went down to the shrine auditorium and watched the wrestling matches; while Lydia was at the performing arts center watching the opera. People who go to the opera and people who go to wrestling matches are generally two different people. You don’t find schizophrenic people that can take in both. What does the opera goer have in common with the guy who goes to watch the wrestling matches or the roller derbies? Can the church of Jesus Christ bring those people together and make them one functioning body? Is the power of the Holy Spirit big enough to overcome the natural, cultural, educational, and economic differences we possess? The statement of the

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Scripture is, “Yes.” The Holy Spirit’s power is big enough to create, out of the diversity of culture and race and nationality, one new humanity—the church of Jesus Christ, which knows no color bar, no racial bar, no ethnic bar, no economic bar, no cultural bar of any kind—except that we are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. May the church ever be that—a microcosm of the world.

When we see, as we do in this church, members of another ethnic community, often young people, that’s a special opportunity for us to reach out and welcome those whom Christ has welcomed. When we see people who are diverse from us, rather than looking for a seat somewhere where we can spot a friend, let’s sit down and welcome one another and appreciate in Christ our differences and know that Jesus Christ, through His power on the cross, has created all the ground level around Calvary and we’re all equal in God’s presence, and He receives us, not by face, but He receives us all by our hunger for Him.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, You make us one. In this sanctuary today there are so many differences among us. We come from so many backgrounds. Church backgrounds, cultural backgrounds. We’re all at different levels of work. We have different ethnic groups represented in the church. So many differences, and there’s nothing like this in the world. Even the public school system doesn’t quite do what the churches do, because it only takes in people at certain age levels. But you seek to span, from the cradle to old age, those diversities within a body that meets, not by compulsion—because there’s a rule that says, “You go there a hundred and eighty days a year”—but by freedom of voluntary choice, that says “I commit to the body of Jesus Christ.”

Lord, when You called us, You didn’t give us the right to call anyone else and to choose who we were going to go with in following You. For when You called us, You called us in association

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with others who You called. You put our hands in theirs and You told us to “Love one another, even as I have loved You” (John 13:34). We want to do that. We want, as a church body, to be a shining example for You in this world. We ask that You would keep any spirit that creates barriers to receiving others out of a friendship or out of a friendship group. We know the value of friendships. But we know that even that can be a danger if it becomes an exclusive club. Help us, Lord, to remain open to people. Then, Lord, the great news out of this is that You receive us. If there’s someone here today that feels like You’ve forgotten where they live, because they’re in such an insignificant and forgotten place, remind them that You know. And that person is just as valuable to You as the person who lives in a mansion. And the person who drives the beaten-up car is just as valuable to You as the person who drives the luxury car. We have infinite value in You, Lord. We thank You for the value You’ve place on our life. We pray to live with that value in our hearts. We will not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. But neither will we think of ourselves more lowly than we ought. And together, we will accept and receive one another, not judging as the world judges, but affirming one another in love and support. Christ, You have made us one, and we thank You. Amen.