

Responsibility of Those Called

“What’s he doing here?” Roland said with an edge in his voice, not realizing he had verbalized the menacing thought.

Grady looked at Roland with a raised eyebrow and then followed Roland’s barely concealed scowl to the other person. “Are you talking about Warren? I don’t know. He’s a good guy.”

Warren was browsing the collection of LP albums at the church rummage sale. Roland and Grady had been at the church since 5:30 A.M., helping arrange everything for the big sale.

Warren lived in a plush subdivision that Roland had only seen from outside of its gates. The houses started at \$600,000. Roland knew Warren through a mutual acquaintance. Roland told himself that he didn’t begrudge Warren his wealth, accolades, and seemingly pristine life. But the tightness around Roland’s eyes and the hardness in his chest did not fit with this confession.

“He’s looking at your collection, man,” Grady said, then added, “Why don’t you go over there and help him out?”

Roland swallowed the tightness in his throat as he moved slowly toward Warren. “God, forgive me,” Roland prayed. “I am jealous and envious of this man. I do not know what is in his heart, and even if I did, it’s nothing worse than what’s in mine. You have commanded me to love everyone. Help me do it, Lord. Help me.”

1. Finish this statement: A neighbor is someone who

2. How can you love a neighbor who hates you?

3. How “neighborly” would you say your group is? Your church?

Love Refuses to Display Favoritism

James 2:1-4, KJV

1 My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.

2 For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment;

3 And ye have respect to him that wareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:

4 Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

James 2:1-4, NIV

¹My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³If 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," ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Even at this time in the life of the early Church, possibly 20 years after Jesus' resurrection, believers were favoring people based on their status, showing preferences based solely on outward appearances.

In verses 2-3, James presents a hypothetical example of this type of bias in his audience. Two people with quite different positions in life visit one of their gatherings and receive different welcomes, to say the least.

The leader of the meeting offers the rich guest a choice seat. The gold ring marks him as someone with both high social status and wealth, for in the first century A.D. those wishing to impress others would rent rings to wear at special occasions to appear to have a high social position.

The poor man's "filthy old clothes" perhaps identifies him as a beggar. The one in charge tells this one to either stand in the back or sit on the floor. Rather than offer him assistance in finding a place to sit as he did with the

wealthy person, he treats the poor man with disdain.

Such discrimination reveals two basic sins, that of a divided allegiance and “evil thoughts” or motives, including their divided loyalties between God and money.

4. *How does the reception of the rich man differ from that of the poor man?*

5. *Why does James condemn such partiality on the part of his readers?*

Love Honors Those Whom God Chooses

James 2:5-7, KJV

5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

6 But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?

7 Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?

James 2:5-7, NIV

⁵Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

Many in the Church at this time were from the poorer class, as they had responded more readily to the Gospel. James reminds his readers that the Lord had chosen the poor to be rich in faith and partake in His coming glorious kingdom, so they were to honor those whom God had chosen to be their co-inheritors of eternal life.

The rich visitor represented the class of people who oppressed early believers with a variety of lawsuits. The Greek word for “exploiting” depicts intense harassment

and ruthless force to deprive early Christians of their rights and their money. In spite of this, James's readers favored the rich when they attended their meetings.

In verse 7, James mentions another inconsistency of favoring those of high social rank. Not only did they harass them in the law courts, but they also blasphemed the name of Jesus. Why display partiality to those who exhibited such open hostility to their beloved Savior?

The "noble name" of the Lord denotes the idea of excellence and honor. Why did they show deference to those who attacked the very Name they cherished?

6. *Why did their favoritism toward the rich lack common sense?*

God's Royal Law Teaches Us to Love

James 2:8-12, KJV

8 If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well:

9 But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.

10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

11 For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

12 So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.

James 2:8-12, NIV

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

¹¹For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹²Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.

James anticipated that his readers might justify their preferential treatment of the rich on the basis of the command to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (vs. 8). The issue, however, was not that of treating the wealthy person with respect, but that of treating the poor person with contempt. Such behavior breaks this command because both are just as much a neighbor as the other.

The reference to the law as “royal” depicts it as something of regal character, a command worthy of high status. This may refer to its lofty character or perhaps that those keeping it demonstrate their allegiance to Jesus, their King.

In verses 10-11, James does not seek to accuse them of breaking the other aspects of God’s “royal law,” but that their behavior demonstrated the same sinful tendencies that show themselves in these other ways.

The bad news is that if we break just one of God’s commands, it makes us a lawbreaker in God’s eyes and in need of redemption. The Good News is that we have a Savior who died in our place taking upon Himself the penalty due for our sins. If possession of eternal life depended on keeping the law, no one could ever obtain it. It depends solely on Jesus (John 14:6).

Rather than a law that enslaves people as did the Old Testament law, the Holy Spirit empowers us to obey its moral demands. In verse 12, James describes our new obligation as coming from a “law that gives freedom.”

Jesus gives us such liberty because in Him we remain forever free from the law’s condemnation (see Rom. 8:1, 31-34). Absolute freedom from the guilt of our sins does not lead to a license to sin; it motivates us to live for the One who gave His life for us so that we might show the same mercy to others regardless of their status (discussed in vs. 13).

7. *How do these verses demonstrate our need for Jesus’ righteousness versus that of our own?*

8. *How can there be a law that gives us freedom?*

The Homeless Visitor

Your neighbor is anyone and everyone. It's the person next door, down the street, in another state, and in another country. Your neighbor is a rich man, a poor man, a healthy man, and a sick man. As we love God and ourselves, we will love others. First John 4:8 says, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."

One Sunday morning, Pastor Derek Rigby, who did not shave for three days, disguised himself as a homeless person and sat on the steps of his church, Trinity Methodist Church in Prestatyn, Wales, surrounded by empty lager cans and syringes. Only one person in the congregation knew of the pastor's plan so he could keep parishioners from calling the police to "remove" the homeless man. As the members of the congregation went into the church, they either ignored the pastor or told him to leave—they were worried about him breaking into their cars parked in front of the church.

When the pastor later walked to the front of the church and identified himself, he said of the people, "Some were very embarrassed. Nobody was angry with me but they were shocked they had ignored me in the way they had."

Pastor Rigby, a former police officer, said he had done the same thing with two other congregations. Those people had given him food, a blanket, and some money before he revealed his identity, but his new congregation did not. It was a visual reminder of what Jesus said: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40, KJV).

9. *Why is avoiding favoritism especially important in a church?*

10. *How can all your good works mean nothing if you don't love others?*

11. *In what ways can you avoid showing the favoritism the world often shows?*

Our Upside-down World

The world is upside down in some respects. We honor the wealthy no matter what they say or do because of their abundance. Their abundance clouds the eyes of those who desperately want riches. The world judges the poor because of their lack of material gain even though they may be rich in faith. On the other hand, God honors the poor because of their rich faith, which is most important to Him. God wants us to be like Him toward the poor.

► *Who will you commit to connect with this week that you might not usually reach out to? Do this individually, as a class, or even as a church if there are folks in your “neighborhood” that others are avoiding or you see need your help and assistance.*

KEY VERSE

Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? —James 2:5, KJV

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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?

—James 2:5, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of February 20 through February 26

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Colossians 1:9-22—Rescued from Darkness.

Tues. 1 Timothy 6:11-16—A Charge to a Young Leader.

Wed. Isaiah 42:8-17—God Turns Darkness into Light.

Thurs. Psalm 119:121-136—God's Word Gives Light.

Fri. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10—You Are Children of Light.

Sat. 1 Peter 2:1-12—You Are Chosen.

Sun. 1 Peter 2:13-25—The Light Brings Freedom.