

The Peril of Partiality
James 1:26-2:13
John Piper

Goree Island, just off the coast of Senegal, West Africa, was the place where captured Africans were collected and shipped off to slavery in the New World. Last July a beautiful and powerful and humbling speech was made there. It gives me an entrance into today's message on racial harmony.

I am aware this Racial Harmony Sunday, as always, that there are more races than white and black, and that the call to racial harmony is very complex and goes deeper than color. But I carry a special burden in my heart for the experience of African Americans and our relationship to each other. And I call us as a church to grow in our understanding of that experience which has a uniquely painful place in the history of our country. I believe the ripple effect of this focus and this understanding will be deeper harmony for all races and cultures represented in our church, and will pull us forward to greater racial diversity and greater racial harmony. At least that's my prayer and my goal.

I can't create this understanding and this relationship by myself. It will be God's work. And you must help me. Join me in prayer, and in reading, and in listening, and in hanging out together across racial lines.

Here is a key part of this speech made on Goree Island . (At the end, I will tell you who made it):

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 and rape 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 in the words of the African proverb, "No fist is big enough to hide the sky." All the generations of oppression under the laws of man could not crush the hope of freedom and defeat the purposes of God.

In America enslaved Africans learned the story of the Exodus from Egypt and set their own hearts on a promised land of freedom. Enslaved Africans discovered a suffering Savior and found he was more like themselves than their masters. Enslaved Africans heard the ringing promises of the Declaration of Independence—and asked the self-evident question, "Then why not me?" . . .

The evils of slavery were accepted and unchanged for centuries. Yet, 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—what Martin Luther King called "a certain kind of fire that no water could put out." That flame would not be extinguished at the Birmingham jail. . . . It was seen in the darkness here at Goree Island , where no chain could bind the soul. This untamed fire of justice continues to burn in the affairs of man, and it lights the way before us.

One of the sad things about this Martin Luther King weekend is that many people—mainly white people—will not mark or celebrate racial justice or the advance of civil rights on this weekend because it is named for Martin Luther King, just like there are many people—mainly black people—who would not listen to that powerful speech if they knew it was spoken by [George W. Bush](#).

I pray that at Bethlehem (Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN) we will be able to hear and feel the beauty and the painful force of that speech made by an imperfect man, *and* that we will mark with prayer and resolve and action a weekend named for another imperfect man.

The Word of God on Racial Harmony

Now we need to hear the word of God concerning racial harmony. And so I invite you to turn with me to James 1 and let the last two verses in that chapter set the stage for the main point, which is: *Don't show partiality because of riches or race; but live under the law of liberty; that is, love your neighbor as you love yourself*.

Setting the Stage

The last two verses of James 1 set the stage for this main point first with a word about *worthless* religion; then with a word about *true* religion.

1. Worthless Religion (v. 26)

First, verse 26 about *worthless religion*: “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.” That's astonishing! If you don't bridle your tongue, your Christianity is a sham. Why? Because Jesus said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” ([Matthew 12:34](#)). Your tongue tells the truth about your heart.

James tells us the kind of thing he has in mind. He says, in [James 3:8-9](#), “[The tongue] is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.” He has in mind how we speak about people made in the image of God. That's his central concern with the tongue—how we talk about people. That's what needs to be bridled.

So here the stage is set for our thinking about racial harmony: Bridle your tongue when talking about white people, black people, Asian people, Hispanic people, Jewish people, First Nation people, Muslim people. Behold the image of God in man, and bridle your tongue by the mercy of God. Make the mule of your tongue serve the mercy of your heart.

2. True Religion (v. 27)

Second, James sets the stage of racial harmony for us in verse 27 with a word about *true religion*. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” When the God-given, Christ-

shaped mercy of your heart has put your tongue in the bridle of obedience, then it puts your legs on the path to the poor. In one way or the other every true Christian cares about the poor.

And, James adds at the end of verse 27, every true Christian cares about being pure and unstained from the world. True religion visits orphans and widows, *and* true religion “keeps oneself unstained from the world.” Here is something to provoke the liberal and something to provoke the conservative. James gets in the face of leftward leaning democrats and James gets in the face of rightward leaning Republicans: To the one he says: Care about social justice and works of compassion. To the other he says: Care about private morality: chastity, honesty, fidelity, modesty, purity.

So the stage is set: True religion—true Christianity—is moved by a Christ-shaped heart of mercy. It bridles the tongue when talking about people created in God's image. It cares for the poor, the ones who can easily be taken advantage of and don't have any power to care for themselves. And it keeps itself free from the impurities of pornography and gluttony and greed. The stage is set.

The Main Point

Now the main point of the message and of the text is this. It comes in 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 most general to the most specific.

- [James 2:12](#)—*Live as those who will be judged under the law of liberty.*
- That is, verse 8 - *love your neighbor as you love yourself.*
- That is, verse 1 - *Don't show partiality to people because of riches or race.*

All the rest of the text is argument—reasons why we should not show partiality. But before the arguments let me say a word of explanation about this main point.

Partiality

First, partiality (v. 1) means that you base your treatment of someone—or your attitude toward someone—on something that should *not* be the basis of how you treat them. So here in the text, for example, the basis of how people get treated is riches and poverty. You see it in verses 2-3: “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, 3 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’ . . .”—this is what James calls partiality. Riches and poverty should *not* be the basis of how a person gets treated. So treating them differently on that basis is “partiality.”

Now I am applying this text today to race as well as riches. The reason is because of the way this word “partiality” is used elsewhere in the New Testament. I'll give you one example, namely, Romans 2. Here Paul is dealing with an ethnic and racial (and religious) issue, namely Greeks and Jews. And he says that both are liable to judgment because of their sin. Then gives the reason in verse 11: “For God shows no partiality”—which is the same word as here in James 1.

So I think James and Paul would be very happy for us to take this text that focuses on partiality because of riches and say that it also applies to partiality because of race. Good treatment and bad treatment, honor and dishonor, rejection and acceptance should not be based on riches or race.

Law of Liberty

Here's another word of explanation about the main point, namely, the words in verse 12, “ So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.” When you don't show partiality but love others as you love yourself, you are acting according to the law of liberty. What is that?

James doesn't define the “law of liberty” (see [James 1:25](#)) but treats it as common knowledge for the early Christians. So I am going to take the definition partly from a verse in Galatians where the language is very similar. [Galatians 5:13](#) says, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Christians are set free from their sins. That is, we are forgiven and freed from the condemnation and dominion of sin. Now we are to live in that freedom—forgiven, not condemned by God. Does that produce lawlessness? Both Paul and James answer no. It produces love. For James the summary of the law of liberty is given in verse 8: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And for Paul the summary of the law of liberty is given in [Galatians 5:13](#), “Through love serve one another.”

For both of them, love 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 this law of liberty. If we have not loved, we will perish, because there will be no evidence that we are born again and justified by faith.

So you can see that James and Paul put partiality based on riches and race in the context of your eternal judgment. This is not a light thing. How we treat others is the evidence of our relation to Christ. If we have been set free from sin's condemnation and dominion by Christ, then we live in liberty. And in this liberty there is a law—the law of liberty, that is, the law of love. We will be judged under this law. And this law says; Do not show partiality on the basis of race or riches.

Seven Reasons Why We Should Not Show Partiality

The rest of the text is argument. I see seven reasons that James gives for why we should not show partiality. We don't have time to deal with all of them. So let me just name them and then close by looking at the last, and the first.

1. Verse 1: Partiality contradicts faith in Jesus Christ as the Lord of glory.
2. Verses 2-4: Partiality reveals a judging heart and behind it evil thinking.

3. Verse 5: Partiality to the rich contradicts God's heart, because he has chosen many of the poor for himself.
4. Verse 6a: Partiality dishonors people created in the image of God.
5. Verses 6b-7: Partiality to the rich backfires and becomes your downfall.
6. Verse 9-11: Partiality makes you a transgressor of the law of liberty.
7. Verse 13: Partiality is not mercy. But if you don't show mercy, you will perish.

God is so good to us not merely to tell us what to do, as if he were only an authority, but to tell us why. He has reasons. He wants us not only to submit, but to submit with some understanding. He wants us to see the beauty and the wisdom and the goodness of his commands. So he gives us reasons to do what he says.

Mercy, Not Racial Prejudice

So I close by looking more closely at the last and the first reason. In verse 13 he says, “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” The meaning here is plain. It's based on the words of Jesus: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” ([Matthew 5:7](#)). If we don't show mercy, we have not known Christ. A Christian is a person who has seen and tasted, and lives on, the mercy of Christ. If there is no mercy in our lives—if we show partiality because of riches or race and come to no remorse and no repentance—we don't know him and we will perish. But if we have tasted his mercy and treasure it, and live in the liberty of his love, then we will show mercy and that mercy will be the evidence of our faith which carries us through the judgment.

Christ's Glory, Not Man's

This is why James begins where he does in verse 1 in dealing with partiality—he begins with faith in Christ, the Lord of glory. And this is where we will end. He says in verse 1: “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”

The key emphasis here is on the word “glory.” James chose to accent that Christians trust Christ the Lord of glory. Why? Because the origin of partiality is either craving for human glory (so you show partiality to the rich or the powerful), or fear (so you show partiality to the one you think will make you safer).

But James' point is: if you know Christ as the Lord of glory—if you trust him as the one who is gloriously strong and gloriously wise and gloriously loving—then you won't be controlled by this craving for human glory or by this fear that uses partiality to be safe. Christ will be your glory—all the glory you need. And Christ will be your security—all the security you need.

So the issue of partiality—because of riches or race—is a huge issue in your life. Are you partial in your attitudes or actions? Or are you trusting Jesus as the Lord of glory? If you are, then his

glory will put you in your place and it make you safe. And from that lowly and safe place will flow love, not partiality. Mercy, not racial prejudice.