

IV. Prejudice

A. What Is James Talking About?

James 2: 1 - 9

¹ My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. ² For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, ³ and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," ⁴ have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? ⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; ⁹ but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

1. Respect of persons

In Romans 2:11 we read:

*For there is no **partiality** with God.*

The King James version uses the phrase "respect of persons." This phrase is translated from only one word in the original language [PROSOPOLEMPTES] which literally means "to take face." It is properly rendered "partiality," and it suggests the conclusion we draw, not from the facts about a person, but from our supposition of who the person is. To illustrate this a little better, many times a teacher who is trying to be fair, who is trying to guard against "respect of persons" while grading tests, will block out the name of the student until the grading is done. In this way, they assure that the grade awarded is based on what the student had done, not who did it. A symbol of fairness in civil judgment we sometimes see today is a blindfolded individual holding scales. The idea is that judgment is made on the basis of facts without looking at how things may appear at face value.

2. Prejudice

In 1 Timothy 5:21 we read:

*I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without **prejudice**, doing nothing with **partiality**."*

J. H. Thayer defines the word here translated "prejudice" [PROKRIMA] as "an opinion formed before the facts are known." Similarly, Vine's Expository Dictionary defines this word as "pre-judging, preferring one person, another being put aside, by unfavorable judgment due to partiality."

This is talking about making judgments of others before we've taken the time to truly get to know them. It also involves our action of excluding or shunning the people we so judge. The English word "prejudice" in the noun form (or "prejudging" as a verb) comes from the prefix "pre," meaning "before", and the root "judicium" means "judgment." Webster defines it as "an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics."

3. Partiality

Again in 1 Timothy 5:21, Vine's Expository Dictionary states that the word here translated "partiality" [PROSKLISIS] "denotes inclination." J. H. Thayer defines the word as "an inclination or proclivity of mind, a joining the party of one." Therefore, this involves not only the exclusion of those we presume objectionable but also the formation or cliques, parties, or groups which would exclude them. This spirit of partiality will cause us to classify people in terms of the groups we see them in. We then assume all individuals in the group behave the way most in the group do instead of judging them on their own merits.

So, to summarize, "respect of persons," "partiality," or "prejudice" is a judgment about people merely because of their status, situation, or other outward characteristic and our exclusion or avoidance of them based upon the same.

B. What Is James Not Talking About?

Prejudice, as we have established, is the formation of an unfair opinion about someone without knowing all the facts, without understanding their situation, or by assuming they are like their peers. Prejudice is not to be confused with a fair assessment we make on the basis of a thorough investigation, inquiry, and observation. The scriptures instruct us to make these judgments about others. We are told we can know people by their fruits and that we should shun Christians who walk disorderly. This is righteous judging, not pre-judging. Consider these verses:

Matthew 7:15-21 ...by their fruits you will know them...

Matthew 18:15-18 ...every word may be established...

John 7:24 ...judge with righteous judgment

Romans 16:15 ...note those who cause divisions...and avoid them...

Moreover, prejudice, as we will see, is typically based on appearances and situations people have no control over. For example, people are often prejudged by their race, though they had no choice about this when they were born. This is different from someone who dresses like a slob by choice when they can do better. This actually involves a different kind of immoral behavior which will be discussed in a separate lesson.

Additionally, we are not talking about having special friends in our relationships. We may naturally be drawn to certain people because of similar likes and dislikes and become especially close to them. Jesus had such special people in his life: John, Peter, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. However, this does not mean we have disregard for others.

C. The Basis Of Prejudice

Prejudice (pre-judgment) can be based on any number of different personal characteristics. We will examine some of these.

1. On the basis of financial status

This is the specific area James was talking about. How might this be demonstrated in your lives, and can you think of any times when you have seen prejudice on the basis on how much a person had or didn't have?

2. On the basis of appearance

At this point, we are not talking about race; we are talking about someone who just looks a little different. Maybe they are scarred, have a physical deformity, or are handicapped. Maybe they simply have some unusual mannerism that sets them apart. We have all known someone who may have been a little bit different, may have looked a little bit different or acted a little differently than others. And we have all heard the jokes about those people. Parents sometimes unwittingly give their children terrible examples by cruelly ridiculing the appearance of another person, or making fun of the way a person walks or talks. Most of the time parents will do it out of earshot of the person they are ridiculing, but sometimes children don't bother with that. The result is that a vicious remark, maybe even made in a joking manner, is thrust into the heart of the innocent person being ridiculed, and they are deeply hurt.

To illustrate, there was a group of adults standing around after Sunday morning worship services, just talking in the back, and they began to discuss the new preacher's wife. They didn't pay any attention to the fact that their little kids were standing around, too. At any rate, one lady said, "Well, she's not ugly, but she's not a bit pretty either." Sure enough, that night at evening services the first thing one little boy did who had heard what was said was to go up to the preacher's wife and say, "So-and-so says you are not a bit pretty." We cannot base our decisions about another human being on their physical appearance.

3. On the basis of intelligence

Does how smart a person is affect how we view their worth? Do we look down on people that we don't think are as smart as we are, feel that they are "dumb" and in some sense inferior because of their lack of intellectual attainment?

Romans 12:16

4. On the basis of gender

Many people today have the prejudice that women aren't as good as men, or men aren't as good as women. Though there are often notable emotional differences between men and women and their God-ordained roles are different, men

and women are on equal standing before God. Consider the admonition in 1 Peter 3:7 where we are both "heirs together of the grace of life."

5. On the basis of age

Paul tells Timothy, "Let no one despise your youth" (1 Timothy 4:12). Certainly, there are times, especially among children, when the older do not get along that well with the younger. Young Christians need to work at getting through those difficult times. Therefore, the exclusive attitude of upper classmen in school against lower classmen should not characterize the young child of God.

6. On the basis of nationality

The apostle Paul instructed Titus to combat national prejudice in the church where he was a preacher:

Titus 1:10-13

In verse 11 he states that some people were saying things they ought not be saying. In verse 12 he gives an example of such: "Cretans are always liars..." Even if most of the people of Crete were liars, it was unfair to assess that all Cretans were so. This is prejudice, and in verse 13 he instructs Titus to deliver a sharp rebuke.

7. On the basis of religion

Some groups hate Catholics, others hate Jews, still others hate Muslims and on and on it goes. It is wrong to view others with contempt just because of what they believe. (Understand that we can and should hate every false way, but not the people themselves.)

John 4:7-24

In this passage, a beautiful story is told how Jesus broke down the prejudicial barriers in His society of not only gender and nationality but also religion as He spoke openly to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.

8. On the basis of race

Racial prejudice is not something new, it has been around for a very long time and it did not begin with the white and black issue. No greater example of prejudice can be found than the prejudice that existed between the Jew and the Gentile in the time of our Lord. It has existed for some 1500 years. The Jews considered the Gentiles as heathens and base barbarians. They were considered filthy and unclean.

Peter was a man who had been born and schooled as a Jew. He also had this Jewish prejudice toward all Gentiles. In fact, so strong was it that the Holy Spirit gave Peter a direct vision, not once but three times, ordering him to enter the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion of Caesarea and a Gentile.

Acts 10:9-20

Look now at Acts 10:34, 35. The conclusion was so clear and so simple: "God is not a respecter of persons." To even further support Peter's conclusion, look at verses 44-48 to see what took place.

So strong was the racial prejudice of the Jews that when Peter went back to his fellow Jewish Christians, they said, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!" (Acts 11:3). In their eyes, that was a terrible thing to do. However, Peter rehearsed the whole event for them, told them how he had six witnesses with him, and how he had arrived at the conclusion that he did. God does not judge a man according to his race, color, or nationality, and Peter learned that we better not do it either.

You would think that that should have been the end of it, but it wasn't.

Galatians 2:11-14

Some time later, Peter had been eating with the Gentiles. When some Jews came, Peter withdrew himself from the Gentiles, causing other Jewish Christians to do the same. The reason Peter did this was because he feared that some of the Jews who had come would not accept his actions because of their prejudice against Gentiles. Paul stated that Peter was to be blamed, and he rebuked him. Peter had sinned. He withdrew his company because of racial prejudice and in so doing he was wrong.

Many Christians still have not learned this lesson. Prejudice was a sin then and it is a sin now. Today we pray fervently for the cause of Christ, sing loudly of the love of God, and you can still occasionally hear Christians making comments

that indicate that they still view a particular race of people with prejudice, prejudging them just because of their skin color.

We must not be deceived. God condemns racial prejudice of any kind. It is even more disturbing and distasteful among Christians. If anybody should know better, we should. Consider the principles taught in these verses:

1 Timothy 2:6

What does this verse teach us? It tells us that Christ died for all men the same.

Matthew 28:18-20

What does this passage tell us? The gospel is to be taken into all the world, regardless of race, color, or nationality.

Galatians 3:26-28

What does it say? It says that we are all the same in the eyes of God: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. This is truly one of the marvelous things about Christianity. God doesn't care what color we are, what race we are, or what nationality we are, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. It is so marvelous to think that when men become reconciled to God, they are also reconciled to one another with no room for prejudices of any kind.

D. The Manifestations Of Prejudice

Prejudice (pre-judgment) manifests itself when we take action on the suppositions we've made about others. This occurs in basically two different ways. The first way is by excluding those we have unfairly prejudged to be disdainful. As has already been noted, excluding others socially because they are tall, short, skinny, overweight, fair-skinned, dark skinned, diseased, or because they look different, talk different, or dress different is wrong. Forming special social groups to exclude those considered unworthy on these grounds is showing partiality, and it's immoral. A Christian will look at the inner man and judge the heart, not appearances (1 Samuel 16:7).

The second way prejudice is manifested is by preferring those we have prejudged to be respectable. This is the other side of prejudice. Instead of negative feelings, unjustifiable positive feelings motivate us to show partiality. For instance, here's a person who is wealthy, wears nice clothes and drives a nice car – he or she must be okay. Here's another person who is good looking and popular – he or she must be alright. Here's a person who gets straight A's, is an honor student, and has colleges lining up to have them come – they must be the kind of person I want to be around. All these are examples of pre-judgments based solely on externals; they are examples of "respect of persons." Though they are positively demonstrated, they are wrong just as are the negative demonstrations.

E. What To Do About It

Understand first that respect of persons (prejudice) is sin. Remember James 2:8-10, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all."

Here are some safeguards against prejudice:

1. Determine to judge according to facts and not appearance

Jesus said:

John 7:24, Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.

Respect of persons is a sin that is learned, children learn it from their parents and from other children. It is also true that judging righteous judgments must be learned as well.

Get to know people personally before forming an opinion about them. Pay no attention to what people say about other people, but talk directly to them instead. Ask them what they think; then your assessment of them will be on the basis of fact, not hearsay.

2. Have a proper evaluation of self

Paul writes:

Romans 12:3, For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think: but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

He also spoke of a mistake that people make: of measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves with themselves (2 Corinthians 10:12). The verdict is that those people are not wise. In other words, if we can see ourselves and others as we and they really are, then we will neither unduly adore nor maliciously defame anyone.

3. Recognize the kinship of man

Since all of us are created in the image of God, and all of us have common parents in Adam and Eve, we really have no reason to look down on, or up at, any one.

Acts 17:24-28

4. Be considerate

Matthew. 7:12, Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

If I desire to be treated with dignity by all, regardless of my wealth or poverty, regardless of whether I am well known or unknown, whether I am a member of a majority race or minority race, whether I am perfectly formed physically or have a defect of some kind, then I must certainly treat all others the same way.