

Our Behavior Toward One Another

By Jeff Noblit

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Anchored in Truth Ministries

1915 Avalon Ave.
Muscle Shoals, AL 35661

Website: www.anchoredintruth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/anchoredintruth

Let's go back to the New Testament epistle of James on this Sunday evening and look at some more very practical exhortations from this local church pastor and thinking on this and meditating on this, though you and I, we have certainly not arrived, it's not real often that I look at a text of Scripture when I don't send the Spirit of God through the week bringing to mind, "Well, we need to help in this area and this area." This is just a text of Scripture that I don't see us having any real problem about in our body and that's good, however, we are all housed in this unredeemed fallen flesh and we are prone to error and what the writer is going to write about is a prejudiced spirit within the church of excluding or showing partiality toward one based on their wealth and their appearance and not on the content of the spiritual work in their hearts.

Let's read it together, James 2, beginning in verse 1, we'll go down through verse 13. He says,

1 My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. 2 For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, 3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? 5 Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose 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. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? 7 Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? 8 If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. 11 For He who said, "do not commit adultery," also said, "do not commit murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are

to be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Now, the apostle has already exhorted them on the practical note of being patient and enduring when trials or testings come and then as we saw last time we were in James, that he's exhorted them about being a doer of the word, one who practices the truth, we looked at that, and now he has this exhortation in James 2:1-13 about how we are to behave toward one another within the church as far as outward appearance and he indicates that what we do, or rather our behavior toward one another has a lot to do with our view of God. If you're not honest and fair and just in your view of one another, you have a warped and wrong view of God. You cannot separate your human relationships from divine relationships.

Real quick, turn over to 1 John 4 just a few pages over to the right in your Bibles and look at verse. He says, "If someone says, 'I love God,'" that's his vertical relationship with God, "and hates his brother," there's his horizontal relationship with his brother, "he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." So he says, "If you're in a right standing, if your fellowshiping faithful with God who is love, then it's going to be out shining to your brothers and sisters in Christ but when you start prejudging people, leaving people out, showing favoritism on things that don't matter to God, then you're not right with God." You don't have a problem with the person and the person certainly doesn't have a problem, you have the problem with God.

So in the church of this day, they were erecting some walls of division and in this particular case he points out the poor man not being accepted, loved, received with the kind of honor and respect the rich man who visited church was being approached with. But now we do also know that there was a Jew and Gentile thing in the early church where the Jewish believers were excluding or considering as second class Christians Gentile believers and the Apostle Paul squashed that out immediately.

Now, I have a little side note to make here and that is that there's a giant, I mean a giant and accepted movement among professing churches today that you can reach people better if you'll pick out a demographic that you're going after. Now, typically this is in a larger metropolitan area and they'll kind of just figure out, "We're going for people who are 18-40 and they're all about this place in life and about this economic status and we design our churches to reach a particular group." Brothers and sisters, nothing could be further from God's truth. You can't go out with the Gospel with your parameters up. You go out with a Gospel to everyone: red, yellow, black and white, rich or poor, it doesn't matter who they are, where they're from, what they've been involved in and throw the Gospel on them with compassion and conviction and see whom God draws into his church. And this whole notion of us building this consumer mentality in the church, we develop the church so that what people's appetites are will be met and they'll be drawn into our church families. I believe that's violating the very principle of what the apostle is teaching here to his local church.

Now, let's look at this just for a moment, three quick points. First of all, when you are prejudiced and you put up walls based on external things such as rich or poor, then you are violating the very spirit and the very heart of your Lord, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Now the Jewish people of this day coveted recognition and they coveted honor. That was just so, I really don't even think you can grasp how thoroughly that was entrenched in their culture which, now, this is a theocracy, their religion and their statehood was one thing so it just overlapped everything and they were so committed to this thing of wanting the praise, the recognition and the honor. I mean, they vied with one another for praise. We saw that some, that very aspect, in the earlier message this morning and we have something of the same problem, of course, in our culture today whether it's climbing the ladder or getting ahead politically or being socially in a certain status and then, of course, you come into the church and if we're not careful cliques can develop and new believers might find it hard to get into. I still hear, just this week, I heard the little statement today of a person who visited a church, not this church, but a church and they weren't there very long until somebody came up who was an old time member and said, "You've got my pew. You've got to move." You know, that's kind of a tongue-in-cheek kind of, but that's the kind of stuff that should not happen in God's church. You don't have a pew. Just getting to sit under the Gospel is a privilege we don't deserve and you don't have a place. Now, I'm sure this kind of comes from the old days when people actually bought pews and actually back in the old church of England which had some good preachers of the era, of the generations rather, they would have pews and they would have doors on them to the pews and you bought your pews and you kept it locked and if they didn't like the preacher, they wouldn't show up and they kept the pews locked. Literally that happened and the people who came would have to sit in the aisle to hear the preacher preach. That's a different day, isn't it, but that kind of thing happened in Christendom.

So James is writing here trying to address this kind of issue and he wants to warn them, "Don't let this thoroughly engrained thing, this prejudice, this wall building that's in your old Jewish culture and religious background, don't let it go over into the church." Now, we know it was already leaking in because look at James 3:1. James 3:1, he says, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." So the church is just getting on. You've got to understand this thing of having an organized church around the Lord Jesus Christ was a new venture. There hadn't been any in the past. All they had was the Jewish synagogue and so when they got together, the people and it's natural when a new church starts or something new like this starts, people start vying for office and for position and the apostle saw that too many people are trying to be in the office of overseer and teacher and he warns them, "This isn't something you should seek because those men will be judged more strictly; be more accountable. You make sure it's God who puts you there. Don't be vying for offices of authority and position."

And, of course, they had the rich/poor thing going on and James actually mentions, you know, he's got on fine clothes and he's wearing a ring and you're showing favoritism to him that you did not show to the poor man. I think that's a word for us today that we ought to be aware of. Someone somewhere said, "Some go to church to close their eyes

and others go to see the clothes." And there is some truth to that and we've got to be careful of that. Some come overdressed to church. They come wanting to make a splash and wanting to make a dash and wanting to be a flash, the glitter and there can be a gaudiness to their dress, but I'm discovering this could go two ways and the principle is wrong in both directions. Whether or not a person is carnal and just wants to make a public show in coming to church and there are whole churches today that are built on how sloppy we can be. And I'm serious. I mean, to be cool in these churches, if the weather is warm at all, you wear short pants, flip flops, a t-shirt not tucked in and you've got your latte in your hand and you come in and it's cool and you're laid back and it's all a show of how dressed down we can be; how untraditional we can be. Look, either way is wrong if you're trying to draw attention to how unique and special you are; what a clever insight you have. Well, that was going on in this church to some degree.

He says in verse 1, it makes an interesting phrase as he's trying to get them to think about what they're doing, he says, "do not hold your faith," and notice the phrase here, "in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism." In other words, here he was the King of glory, the infinite eternal one who dwelt in the realms of regal heavenly splendor, worshiped and honored and bowed down to by everyone, this glorious, that's why it says glorious Lord Jesus Christ. What was his attitude? His attitude was that he denied himself and took the form of a servant, even a bond slave, even to the point of giving his life for his children. So it says how this violates your Lord; how this violates his very heart, his very character, and his very conduct.

You remember when the Lord Jesus was sitting outside the temple and he was watching the Pharisees, again, the religious leaders and often hypocrites, and they would come by and put large gifts into the treasury. They wouldn't dare put a small gift in because they wanted the people all to know what they were doing. Now, there's nothing wrong with that. He didn't condemn that. That was good that they did that but then a little widow came along and gave two mites, just a penny or so what it was worth, and she gave out of her poverty. She gave all she had to give and Jesus said she gave the greatest gift. So our Lord's spirit was the outward appearance has not bearing on the quality or the holiness or the spirituality of the person in the church.

The Lord Jesus saw the potential in people. He looked at Simon Peter and he called him, "You're going to be my rock." Well, Peter wasn't near a rock yet. Christ was going to make him one and that's what should be our heart when we see someone. By the way, when a new Christian comes in, we've had a lot of years together; we're pushing 33 years and we've grown a lot, we've had to repent a lot, hopefully we've matured a lot. Well, there may be new believers come in who don't know any of the things we've experienced and there's going to have to be some compassion and some longsuffering and some welcoming of new ideas and different viewpoints because we're all growing at some point. You can't expect a person to come in who hasn't sat under good expositional preaching to, "I have a good grasp of doctrine or of church life." And particularly church life because most churches aren't practicing the kind of things we at least try to practice here. So let's don't put up walls and let's don't leave people out. Let's just understand we're all growing. Look, as long as a person is humble and willing to grow, we ought to

say, "You're welcome." Now, there are some lines to draw but they ought to be lines God draws, not that we draw and that is open, unrepented of willful sin is a line we have to draw sometimes. That's called church discipline. But the way the Bible teaches it, we don't draw the line. We approach them with compassion and do what the Bible says then depending on how they respond, it's God who draws the line. We just agree with God. Whichever way they respond depends on what we have to do as far as building a wall of separation and saying, "You can't be in the fellowship." But these folks were building some walls that were built on things like dress, maybe even the color of the skin, depending on their background and all of those kind of things instead of the fruit of the Spirit are not to be tolerated in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words when he says "consider your glorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," I think he's basically saying, "How would Christ look at them?"

Now look at verse 5. Let's jump down to an interesting statement here. He says the same thing in the epistle to the Corinthians, the same basic principle. He says in verse 5, "Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" Now, James is not saying you have to be poor to be saved. He is saying this: if you look across the landscape of true churches, you'll find they're not many, the majority at least are not the high up, muckety-muck financially brokers of the community. Now, God can save some very wealthy folks and he does save some, he just chooses not to save many.

Now I heard a preacher that I, by the way, admire try to help this text out one time, actually he was in the Corinthian text and he was trying to help God out and make God look a little better and he says, "Now God can save rich folks but he just has more trouble doing it." Absolutely not what the text is saying. God has no trouble saving anybody he wants to save. That's not what this...he's saying God in his sovereign elect choices of whom he ultimately brings into the kingdom, if you'll look at yourselves, you'll find the great majority of us are just average folks. You say, "Pastor, God's blessed me and I'm financially ahead of most folks and I love the Lord and I don't think it makes me special and I'm grateful." Well, be thankful God doesn't save many like you. That's what he's saying in the text. He does save some, he just doesn't save many.

So he's trying to point out, "Look at what our Lord does. He wouldn't live this way. He never had this kind of prejudice. He never judged people by outward appearance. He looked at the potential of a sinner if they repent and come to faith in him and in building his church, he doesn't choose many of the world's elite, if you will, to be a part of his family." So he said, "Church, why would you have that kind of prejudice? You are radically opposite. It violates the very spirit and character of our Lord."

Well, I'll hurry on. Let me go to II. some of you want to get home and watch a ball game. II. It violates logic also. Not only does this violate our Lord, his character and his very being, but it violates logic. He just gets down to a very common sense and practical experience they were having. In verses 6 and 7, notice what he says, "you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they," that's the rich again, "not blaspheme the fair name by which you have

been called?" Now this is a stern rebuke. He says, "You're acting just like those who are actually persecuting some of you." The religious authorities who were also the government authorities of that region were actively persecuting the Christians in the church, trumping up false charges against them, dragging them into the courts, of course, having a prejudice with the judge, having false charges brought against Christians, punishments, imprisonments, whatever. He says, "Why would you have a favoritism for those who are doing you that way?" That's what the rich plan of the world is known to do to those that they don't like and why would you show a favoritism to that kind of a person?

Our Lord came into this world and was poor. He was the victim of injustice. He was treated with scorn, with ridicule, unfairly, with contempt and many other ways by the wealthy religious authorities of his day. Jesus' birth, Jesus' life and the redemption that Jesus brought to us is in every way a picture of tearing down the walls that this world tries to erect and that's one of the glorious things about a true and healthy church is that you have so many people together who without God having changed their heart they would never hang out together. You know, it's just detestable to me when I hear about we're this type church or we're that type church and usually they're talking about some demographic, some characteristic that's true to the external man. No, you ought to be able to look at Grace Life Church and say, "I can't figure them out. They have some of the poorest of the poor. They have a couple of wealthy people. They have a lot of people in between. They have people who are one colored skin and another colored skin. They have mixed racial marriages. You just can't describe them other than they all claim that Christ has humbled them and saved them." And that's what he's saying here.

Well, let me hurry on and go to III. It violates the law when we live this way. That's the third thing he's going to say here. It violates the law. Look at verse 8, he says, "If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law," in other words he says there's this overarching truth, law, that all the other laws of God come under. If you're fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well." Someone said that our lives are the best defense of our theology and, boy, that ought to be true. As we go out into the culture, as people know about us, they ought to see that those people love unconditionally. They are not ones that just run around and build up relationships and try to get in certain groups for self-gain and self-advancement. They love because they love Christ and they love like Christ.

This royal law he talks about supersedes all other laws. In other words, there would be no need for thousands of other laws if everyone fully obeyed this law, loving your neighbor as yourself. Now you think about that. If you love your neighbor as yourself and you're not going to commit adultery with them. If you love your neighbor as yourself, you're not going to steal from them; you're not going to lie to them and on and on we could go. It just fulfills about every other law and that's the heart he says we ought to have toward one another in the church. Now he calls it the royal law and let's see, when he speaks of royalty, it's like being a king and I think there's a great truth to that. When you love others like you love yourself it makes you a king, but when you are harboring prejudice and you are harboring bitterness and you are harboring unforgiveness like happened in the early

church where the Gentiles and the Jews had such animosities and atrocities committed one to the other and they could go back and think on these things and then they got converted and they couldn't let that go, he says, "You're not living by a kingly royal law." You're not a king when you live in hatred and bitterness and unforgiveness and prejudice, you're living as a slave; you are in a bondage. Is that not a bondage? Think about sitting in a church building and looking in your eye across the room and seeing somebody and I'll just bring this up, never been a problem here, by the way, at least not that I've ever know, you look across the room and there's a mixed race couple and something in your heart kind of has a prejudiced, judgmental, spiteful...who's enslaved in that? You're enslaved. You're not free. You're bound. You're the loser. You're not living as the king with liberties, you're living as a slave in bondage. You're not living by the royal law.

Now look, there are some things that we were taught in our culture that are good things that coincide with Scripture but there are some good old conservative traditions in our culture that we have to reject as unbiblical and wrong. And wrong. I remember Dr. Adrian Rogers of the Bellview Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee and this is many years ago, he had not been there long and he talked about the first time an African American family came to join his church and he said, "My whole ministry was on the line right there. If the church didn't vote them in, I was resigning immediately." Well, they did vote them in and they crossed that barrier. Of course, this is Memphis, Tennessee and many years ago and it wasn't maybe as easy as it is today. So those have been some good things that have happened, I think, in the South. There are some other things that it's just a shame that we bring those kind of just and good caricatures and prejudices and those need to fall and some others we've let fall we should have kept the wall up, just to be honest.

Well, love enables us to obey the word of God and to treat others as God intends for them to be treated. Now, verse 9, hurrying on, he said, "But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." Then let's go on to verse 10, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." Verse 11, "For He who said, 'do not commit adultery,' also said, 'do not commit murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law." Here's what he's saying: you have convinced yourselves that it's okay and, again, they come out of a culture like this, very easy, just as natural as breathing to think this way that they ought to show a prejudice toward the wealthy man because the wealthy were often the Pharisees and their religious leaders and they esteemed, they harmonized wealth with godliness and so it was just nature. He said but when you start doing that, you think it's a small thing; you think your prejudice is a small thing. He said, "Look, you're as guilty of law breaking as if you committed murder or adultery." Now think about that. How many of you are going to go out here today and tonight and commit murder? Well, I hope none of you, but yet is it not rather easy for us to go out of here with a judgmental, bitter, prejudiced spirit on something on the outside that doesn't matter at all to God? Doesn't matter at all to God.

Well, I learned something years ago, I think I mentioned this to you a time or two; when you've been somewhere 33 years, you mention most things a time or two. But I had a

roommate when I was in college. I had several roommates so you probably can't figure out who it was. And he was a slob. He just was. Now, I didn't get any awards for being the neatest college student, by the way, and the most organized, but he was just very prone to never clean up, never pick up, never wash the dishes. Just didn't do it. And I had been teaching something along this line and it had something to do with just loving others like Christ loves them and how does Christ love? He loves without merit. He loves when there's nothing to make you want to love. So I thought I'm just going to try to love him like Christ loves him and I'm going to choose, now listen to me, choose by the act of the will to clean up his dishes, to clean up his clothes, to clean up his messes. I'm just going to try that for a few weeks and, you know, it's amazing when I began to do that, I began to be drawn closer to him, have a more brotherly love for him and have a heart that cared for him. Maybe that's why mommas love us so much because they spend all their life doing things for us that we ought to have been doing for ourselves. But that's an important principle.

You know, somebody said we only believe as much of the Bible as we practice so the next time, listen, the next time your flesh raises up some little, "Well, I don't agree..." You know what I'm talking about. Next time your flesh does that, determine in your heart, "I'm going to write them a note and tell them I love them and I'm praying." Do something for them. Just tell your heart your heart's not Lord, Jesus is Lord. Did you hear that? Tell your emotions your emotions are not Lord, Jesus is Lord and you're going to choose to do what Jesus would do and you're going to show a favor, a love, a support, do something good for them and watch your heart follow the truth you acted on. Are you hearing me? Your emotions and your heart will follow the truth you walk out. That's why we're to be committed to Jesus. You're not always to wait until you feel something, you're to commit to him because you become like what you commit to. Your heart begins to be molded into that image or toward that person.

Now, in verse 12 he says, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." Judged by the law of liberty means that we are those who have been freely accepted by grace. We are judged by a law of liberty. In other words, we love God without the burden of legal requirement. We come in full liberty of grace to God. Sinners as we are, we have free access to the merits of Jesus Christ. Now his point is: how can you not love each other in the same way? So you live under that kind of grace, love from God, now you function one toward another in the same way.

Then verse 13, "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." The point is: every Christian has known great, great, great mercy and if you can go on with a prejudiced, unjust rejection, separation from, denouncing attitude, whatever it is toward somebody else, you're not showing mercy. Here's his point: that's inconsistent with who you are and if you are one who just never can get over that, if you're one who just can't get past those cultural prejudices that the Scripture condemns, then you're not one who knows mercy either. You can show some when you've been shown so much. In other words, you can get over it. And listen, not only get over it and you and I have no concept of how difficult it would have been in this

day for a Gentile and Jew to come to God's house together. It was an enormously difficult thing for a Jew to accept that, but the Scripture not only requires them to accept their Gentile brothers and sisters but to love them and joy with them and accept them just like they did their Jewish brothers and sisters and so can we. So can we.

Let's stand together in prayer.