

God's Reality Breaking In

James 1:26–2:9

Getting Ready

When we face difficult circumstances, we have the opportunity to “test” the depth and security of our trust in the God who meets us in Jesus Christ. We can respond to these difficulties by seeking to see more clearly how true and wonderful God really is and to more fully live by the truth. James seeks to help his readers in this process by reminding them of the true character and purposes of the triune God.

In leading them to see more clearly the good and wonderful nature of their Father of lights (1:17) who has created them to be firstfruits of His creation (1:18), James also warns them against being deceived. He tells them not to be deceived about God's work in the midst of their challenging lives (1:16) nor about what it means to truly live by hearing and receiving His word (1:22).

Deception about God and the nature of our lives in Him breeds distrust and sin. We need to be wise about the ways that we can be tempted to be “in two minds” about God so that we can weed them out and welcome more fully His implanted word (1:21). In this next passage (1:26–2:9), James warns his readers about how they may be deceiving themselves in the ways they treat others.

Looking at the Text: James 1:26–2:9

Read the text two or three times, marking it up as you go. Then answer the questions.

²⁶If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion 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.

^{2:1}My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ²For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³and 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," ⁴have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? ⁸If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

Digging Deeper

True Religion (1:26–27)

1. What do you think James means when he says that a person’s “religion is worthless”?

James is writing to believing people—that is, to Christians. They view themselves as “religious people,” as those who are practicing their faith. Religion (*threskeia*) refers to the ways our relationship with God is manifest in our lives. In the midst of the trials they are facing, James’s readers show through their behavior that they hold some misconceptions about the character and work of God and what it actually means to act out of a trust relationship in Him.

James wants to address these misconceptions, because holding on to them impedes his readers’ ability to fully live out of trust in God. This is why these assumptions lead to a religion that is “worthless” (*mataios*). *Mataios* means without ground or purpose and therefore worthless or useless. It is worthless because it does not lead to a deeper knowledge and experience of the Father of lights, who is the source of every good and perfect gift. It does not lead to an ever-deepening trust in God, who is at work in us to make us “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

James is aware of the behavior of the readers in the churches to which he is writing, and he wants to help them think through the theological misconceptions that underlie some of these behaviors. It is the actual practice of our faith that reveals our “working theology”—what we believe about God in our hearts, not necessarily what we affirm of Him in our doctrines. James wants his readers to consider what their behaviors, especially their words and their treatment of others, reveal about their faith.

2. What connections do you see between 1:19 and 1:26?

3. Why do you think that someone who doesn't bridle his tongue deceives his heart?

In 1:19, James told his readers to be quick to hear and slow to speak. Here he uses the image of bridling one's tongue. James now tells us that the reason it is so important to be careful about what we say is that, when we are not, we can end up deceiving our very hearts. Why is that?

When we are undergoing trials, we may be tempted to feel that our current situation is an exception or a special circumstance that permits us to be less restrained in what we say. *After all, we think to ourselves, this is a very hard time, and so being more lax with my words is perfectly understandable, if not justifiable.*

But when we justify what we say by our immediate circumstances, then we make those circumstances our deepest reality. We may say that we trust God, but by not bridling our tongues, we are not acting out of or keying off of our "trust." Rather, we are keying off of our current situation and whatever thoughts or emotions are triggered by it at the moment.

When we don't practice restraint on our tongues, our religion is not grounded in the reality of God and His presence and work in our lives. So we deceive our hearts. We go along thinking we are "religious" when we are not, in fact, practicing trust in God.

4. Why does true religion include visiting widows and orphans?

James continues to expound on true religion as opposed to religion that is worthless. In 1:27, he describes true religion as that which is "pure and undefiled." These two words are basically synonyms and mean that which is unmixed or all one thing—like a pure metal. There is no disjunction between the heart and the actions. Here he describes religion that is pure and undefiled in terms of caring for orphans and widows and keeping oneself "unstained from the world."

In James's time, orphans and widows were the powerless of their communities. They had lost those to whom they had been connected and who were responsible to take care of them. They had no status or influence in society and no one to look out for them.

James tells his readers that pure religion is to visit these “fringe” people in the midst of their affliction. In other words, it is to visit these children and women in their helplessness, in their pain, rather than waiting until they are in a better, more respectable situation or are in a position to give them something back. Visiting them in their affliction offers no advantage to the one doing the visiting.

Why is this pure and undefiled religion? Is James just telling his readers to try harder to be good Christians and to add reaching out to others on top of dealing with their own struggles? Is he warning them that they are not doing enough for God?

I think these questions reflect how we are often tempted to interpret James's words. But if that were the case, then how is this passage connected to encouraging us to receive, make room for, the word God has implanted in our hearts (1:21)?

In our trials, we most deeply struggle with trusting that God is still the good and wonderful God He has revealed Himself to be. Our struggle over being both open-handed in our relationships and restrained with our words comes from our not seeing clearly that God is still fully present and active, still fully “on our side.” God remains the same even though our circumstances may drastically change.

When we are seeking to trust God to be our only and real source of life, peace, rest, and worth, then we can enjoy the wonderful freedom of caring for others with no need for a direct return from them. That is why it is true religion. It is a free and true response to the very heart of our extravagant God who so lavishly loves us. Acting from a place of trust in our Father of lights who gives us all good things enables us to give to others out of a fullness rather than neediness or emptiness.

The second part of James's description of true or pure religion is to “keep oneself unstained from the world.” The practice of our faith in God involves not allowing ourselves to be poisoned by the world. The “world” (*kosmou*) means the sphere of human life that does not acknowledge God as Creator and Lord. The word translated “keep” (*terein*) means to watch over or guard. So the true practice of our faith is to actively guard against any thinking that undermines or doesn't arise out of or feed our trust in God.

This statement connects back to James's earlier admonition to put away "all filthiness and rampant wickedness" in order to more fully to welcome "the implanted word." As we do this, we come to see more and more the truth that the world cannot tell us who we are and what true life is, so we stop asking it to do so. Of course this is a process—part of the testing of our faith to make it steadfast (1:3-4).

The exercise of true religion frees us from the temptation to regard ourselves as either hapless victims or tragic heroes. Rather, we are choosing to live as if we really *are* the beloved sons and daughters of our gracious heavenly Father, who is with us in the most intimate way, whatever our circumstances. He is transforming us to be in every way His mature children, able more and more fully to live in the love with which He loves us completely.

Against Showing Partiality (2:1-7)

5. Look back at 1:9-11. What connections do you see between that passage and 2:1-7?

Within the congregations James is addressing, there are rich and poor, and apparently this disparity was causing a great deal of strife for these Christians because this is the second time that James speaks of it. Here he deals with the tendency his readers have to treat each other differently according to one's material wealth. James gives an example of this difference in 2:2-3. The wealthy man who comes to the church is granted a good seat while the poor man is told to stand or sit on the floor.

The deeper issue that James addresses here is the tendency of his readers to show partiality. For these congregations, this partiality was especially seen in how they dealt with people of differing degrees of wealth. But James wants to address the problem of showing any kind of partiality. That's why, in 2:1, the noun "partiality" (in the original Greek) is in the plural form—partialities! James indicates that being partial in any way is not compatible with trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. Why is that?

To begin to answer this question, let's start with the word "partiality" (*prosolemsiais*), found in 2:1 and 2:9. It is a word that comes from the Greek root that means "face" or "appearance." The form of the word James uses means

“being a respecter of persons.” To show partiality, then, is to make distinctions between people based on some outward quality—how someone “appears.” We say, “on the face of it.”

6. Notice how James describes Jesus in 2:1. Why do you think he includes this description in his imperative against showing partiality?

In 2:1, James tells his readers that being a respecter of persons, showing partiality, is not compatible with living by trust in “our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” Notice he doesn’t just say “Jesus,” but adds further descriptors that indicate more particularly who He is. What do these descriptions of Him add to James’s point that showing any kind of partiality has no place in the lives of those who have placed their trust in Jesus? To understand this more fully, we need to consider first what biblical faith/belief/trust is. (These English words are all translations of one Greek word, *pistis*.) The biblical understanding of faith is that one’s faith is completely defined by the *object* of one’s faith rather than by the strength of one’s faith.

Our modern use of the word *faith* tends to focus exclusively on the strength of the faith you have rather than who or what you are putting your faith in. The message in many movies and books today is that I can be or do anything as long as I “believe” or “have faith.” If I believe hard enough, then I can accomplish whatever I desire. But this psychological understanding has nothing to do with biblical faith. To speak of faith for the Hebrew is to speak of the object of your faith. Faith is the trust that you have in something or someone, and your trust is shaped by that object or person.

I think we approach this Hebrew concept of faith in our interpersonal relationships. I come to trust someone else in ways that fit their character as they have revealed that to me. I trust my husband to be an excellent help in questions of theology. I know of his extensive knowledge and background in this area and I respond by having great confidence in him. However, I do not trust him to cut my hair and I do not believe that if I just had more “faith” that he would become a hairdresser! My faith in my husband is a response to and is shaped by the man I know him to be.

So in describing Jesus as “the Lord Jesus Christ,” as “the Lord of glory,” James is reminding his readers of the object of their faith, exactly who the One they have placed their trust in is. For this object ought to determine the character of their faith.

First of all, this Jesus is the Lord (*kuriou*). The title refers to one who is exercising valid authority and power. While this title, “lord,” can refer to earthly authorities, it is used most often in the Greek Old Testament and in the New Testament to refer to God. James uses this title several times in his epistle—always to refer to God or Jesus. Jesus, in whom they have placed their faith, is no less than their divine Lord. He is the One who has the real authority over their lives. He is in charge and oversees it all. He has the final “say.” True faith recognizes and affirms this.

Second, Jesus is the Christ. The title Christ (*christou*) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah,” or “anointed one.” It is clear that, from the beginning of the Christian church, the early Christians understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of Old Testament expectations of one from the line of David who would come with God’s authority and power to bring salvation to His people. He has authority, power, and strength to rescue, deliver, make whole, save. Faith believes this.

Last, Jesus is “the Lord of glory.” The Greek here is unusual, so it is not quite clear exactly what James means to say. James is being very awkward if he is primarily trying to call Jesus the Lord of glory. A more literal translation is “the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the glory.” It does seem that James is saying more than just that Jesus is glorious. By speaking of Jesus as “the glory,” it is likely that James means to convey that here, in Jesus, we see and meet the very glory of God. He is, Himself, God’s glory coming and shining out to us, making it manifest to us.

Glory (*doxes*) was a word that came to be used by the scholars who translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek to describe the “force of [God’s] self-manifestation” (Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II, pp. 238–245). Glory encompasses all of the expression, outflow, and manifestation of God’s magnificence and perfection as the Creator and Lord of all. It is God and God alone who can be said to have glory. And faith glories in this knowledge.

What is fascinating to me about the understanding of the glory of God is that the Hebrews believed that we see the real glory of God not in God possessing it for Himself, but in His sharing His glory with us when we behold Him. He is so glorious that He can share His glory. This is what happens when Moses goes up on the mountain to be with God and he beholds His glory. He returns to his

people with a radiant, shining face. Jesus as “the glory” or “the Lord of glory” is the One in whom we see the glory of God streaming out. He is the self-expression of the very character of God Himself.

To have faith in this Jesus is to count on Him to be the Lord, the Christ, and the glory or the Lord of glory. So James seems to be saying that showing any kind of partiality is not compatible with faith in who this Jesus really is. As with “worthless religion,” showing partiality indicates that you are not living as if your faith was in “the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” Why is that?

The primary partiality that James’s readers are guilty of showing is between those who are rich and those who are poor in material goods. The people in these congregations were honoring the wealthy people who came to their worship services. The rich had the power and authority in their communities, just as they do today. They were the ones who had some influence, some ability to get things done or help someone out. In biblical times, people often thought that one’s wealth indicated without question God’s blessings and favor on that person. So they were being obviously partial to the rich. Given this bit of background, can we see why that might have been, and why James regards this behavior as revealing a defective faith?

Isn’t it the case that we show partiality when we believe that one person has greater significance or “glory” than another? We treat those we deem “more glorious” better because we hope somehow to share in or benefit from their authority and glory, while we neglect those who seem to have little or no significance or authority and who offer us no benefits and have no glory to shine on us. If we weren’t after gaining some glory, we’d have little reason to treat some with honor and others with neglect or indifference. Had the rich become objects of faith/trust/belief to those showing partiality in a way that actually displaced or substituted for their confidence in Jesus?

Was their behavior motivated by a certain trust in the “lordship,” “messiahship,” and “glory” of the wealthy compared to the poor? It seems so. But James has more to say on this.

7. Contrast what James says in 2:1 and 2:4. What does 2:4 add to James’s argument against showing partiality?

When James's readers treat the rich and the poor who come to their congregations with partiality, James asks further, "have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" After reminding his readers of the character of the Lord Jesus, James now exposes more of the character of their partiality. Their actions indicate that they have "made distinctions among themselves" and become "judges with evil thoughts."

A more accurate rendering of the Greek here for "evil thoughts" (*dialogismon poneron*) would be "malicious reasonings" or "speculations." And how did they become these "judges with evil thoughts"? The esv translation "have you not then made distinctions among yourselves" may not be the clearest translation of the Greek text. The verb translated "have ... made distinctions" (*diekrithete*) is the same word that in 1:6 is translated "doubting." It means to waver or be inconsistent. The preposition translated "among" can also mean "in" and should probably be translated "in" here. So a closer translation might be, "Are you not inconsistent within yourselves..." The picture here is someone who is divided within herself—facing both ways.

By showing partiality, they are acting like a bad (evil) judge, who does not care first and foremost about justice and mercy, but who looks for his or her own gain. Applied to this situation, these "judges" do not act impartially, but weigh in the balances the two opposing parties to see who can and who cannot give them some share in their "glory." They sort out who possesses the kind of authority that would be advantageous to them and who does not in order to parcel out their favor. James's readers are discriminating like a corrupt judge—using their own powers of judgment to secure their own advantage rather than seeking to benefit those who need help or reconciling and putting right disjointed relationships.

But what does this have to do with the Lord Jesus? How does their behavior compare to the character of the God they claim to worship and trust in, the God of their "religion"? It misrepresents it entirely! How does God use His powers of judgment, His authority, His lordship? To seek his own advantage? No. Rather, to come to the rescue of the powerless, to make things right, to bring reconciliation, healing, salvation! And that's what makes God glorious just as we see in Jesus Christ. He does this for all, with generosity, bringing them to be perfect and complete. God is not partial in bringing salvation. He is not double-minded and does not waver in His purposes. No wonder showing partiality towards others is not compatible with trusting in the Lord of glory Himself.

But more than that, exercising such discrimination indicates that they do not trust in God's own glory to be sufficient for them. They seek the glory of other human creatures! The glory of God shining out in Jesus is apparently not enough

for them, is not all that glorious. So they attempt to gain additional favor (glory) from those they reckon can offer it, rather than wholly trust in the very source of glory Himself.

Again, being double-minded about persons and so treating them in two very different ways reflects a double-mindedness about God and God's glory manifested in Jesus. Their religion is mixed, not pure, both towards God and then towards fellow believers. Those who act this way have yet to fully trust in the glory of God given to us in the Lord, Jesus Christ.

8. Contrast all that James says here about how his readers treat the rich and the poor with the truth about each of these groups as James understands it (2:2-7).

From what James says here, the way they have become “judges with evil thoughts” is that they decide how to treat people according to what human category they fit in. When someone comes into their congregation, James's readers are tempted not to see an individual, a particular person, but an example of a generic world-oriented category. They treat all those who look wealthy one way, and those who look poor, another. They assume or speculate that their social class indicates the relative worth of each of these people.

Notice that when James speaks next about the damage that results from this partiality, he focuses not on the effects upon those being treated this way, but on the damage his readers are inflicting on themselves.

Look at what James says about the poor that they have so easily set aside: “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?” From God's point of view, it would seem that if there is anything we need to remember about those in poverty, it is that God chooses to give those who lack wealth in this world the ability to richly, more fully, count on Him and their inheritance in His kingdom.

There are some among you, James tells them, who can bless you by reminding you of the wonderful reality of God that we know only by faith. These are the poor among you! James's readers are missing the blessings these people have

to offer because they see them only as the world sees them. They don't see them in their connection to the Lord of glory. Their partiality blinds them to the real blessing of God's kingdom they could receive from the poor.

Next, he speaks to those readers of his who have preferred the wealthy and does so by appealing to them from within their worldly framework. He reminds them of the sad truth about so many of the rich they are eager to please. They are the ones who, in general, oppress them, drag them into court, and even "blaspheme the honorable name by which [they] were called." So even within their world-oriented framework their partiality does not make sense.

James is not saying here that all rich people oppress others, or that all poor people have wonderful faith in God. He is not trying to get them to now mistreat the rich and honor all the poor. That would merely invert their double-mindedness, their partiality, not eliminate it. They would still be guilty of seeing others merely as members of categories and apart from who they are in their relationship to the Lord of glory.

James wants them to see what they miss when they are respecters of persons. They rob themselves of being able to see people as they really are, and to receive from others what they actually have to give at a deeper level. They were so busy courting the circumstantial favors of those who really didn't care about the things of God that they missed the wealth God wanted to give them through some whom, although among them, they nevertheless ignored. They failed to see everyone in terms of God's glorious, single-minded, saving relationship to each of them manifested in Jesus Christ, whether rich or poor.

Fulfilling the Royal Law (2:8-9)

9. What is the connection between fulfilling "the royal law" in 2:8 to the preceding section about the rich and the poor?

10. Why is showing partiality a sin?

James summarizes this warning against partiality by stating positively how his readers should relate to one another. Instead of showing partiality, James encourages them to fulfill “the royal law,” which is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This commandment is found in the Old Testament and, more significantly, is quoted by Jesus when He was asked what the greatest commandment is. It is the second part of His answer. The first half is “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk. 12:29-30 RSV).

Rather than sorting others into distinct generic human categories, we are to see everyone as our neighbors. That’s the truth about who they are. And when we do, we’ll love them as ourselves. There are no generic people, only the individual in front of you who belongs to God. We are to love our neighbor as we ourselves are loved by God. The truth is, he or she is also an object of His love. That is the true basis for how we are to treat others.

Before Jesus, we are all on the same level. We at best share in and reflect *His* glory. There is no need for distinctions when we see He is our one true source of a glorious life. We can stop running after others for affirmation or pity, stop honoring only those we think might be able to benefit us, and be open to receive blessings from God in surprising places where *He* desires to give them. What freedom and joy come when we truly allow God to tell us who we are, when we allow Him to show us His presence and work in our lives right now. We often miss out on receiving and enjoying fully what He is doing in our lives. We overlook how He shares His glory with us, because we are looking for it in all the wrong places (any place outside of our relationship with Jesus Christ).

Now, we may ask, isn’t the fact that some are rich and some are poor clearly an indication that God is showing partiality, and so we can as well? Certainly if we look around, our lives do not seem to be equally balanced with those around us. We are tempted to believe that we are justified in showing partiality because our circumstances and our gifts and talents are not the same as those around us.

But James dismisses this idea completely. To show partiality, he goes on to say, is to commit sin. It’s as simple as that. James told his readers in 1:5 that God is One who “gives generously to *all* without reproach.” God does not show partiality. Since this is not obvious when we look at people’s circumstances, then we cannot look at their circumstances to tell us who God is and what He is like. Nor should we merely react to those around us according to their outward status and appearance.

The root of sin is not trusting in or counting on God to give us His life and presence, and to make us more able to receive that life. We sin when we turn and trust in ourselves or others, the creature rather than the Creator. When we show partiality, we are not trusting at that moment that God is a generous giver, giving to all and without reproach. We are not counting on God to be the God He has revealed Himself to be in the Lord Jesus Christ. We fear He may not come through or we simply don't want what He is offering if it doesn't include getting out of various trials. But this distrust in the truth of who God is leads to disobedience towards our neighbors, a disobedience that misrepresents how God regards and treats us. That is why James has to say it is sin.

And what is so sad is that when we trust our own agendas and opinions about our lives and what they should look like, we are in danger of missing out on the very wonderful, rich blessings God has for us among the powerless, ignored, or rejected of our society. But when we continually turn back to resting in Jesus, the Lord of glory, we are freed from needing to gain our worth or identity through others, and so can see them more clearly as those loved by God and receive what they have, in Him, to give.

Connecting with Our Lives

1. What are some different situations in which we might not be “bridling” our tongues?

2. Are you aware of ways that your “working theology” is different from your “stated theology”?

3. Who are the “widows and orphans” (powerless) in our society?

4. In what ways might we be tempted to show partiality (not just towards the wealthy or powerful)?

5. How does remembering that Jesus is Christ the Lord, and the glory affect your trust in Him and how you live out of that trust?

6. Can you think of examples when you were wavering or in two minds about someone, which led to judging them on the basis of bad reasoning?

7. Can you think of examples of when you have treated someone simply as a member of a category and so were not able to see him or her as God does?

Thank God for who He truly is and pray together for a greater ability to see others as He sees them.