



**The Royal Law**  
James 1:27-2:13

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You've heard the phrase "don't judge a book by its cover." But it's human nature to form an opinion of someone based on first impression. This video proves that point.<sup>1</sup> [VIDEO]

When Susan Boyle came on stage, the audience was not impressed with a 47-year-old woman with bushy eyebrows. The audience snickered and the judges rolled their eyes. But they were shocked when she started singing, and they gave her a standing ovation. And to date, that video has had 95 million views on YouTube, and she has sold over 20 million albums!

We tend to do the same thing that audience did with Susan Boyle. We judge people by their appearance. It's human nature to stereotype people based on what they look like. And we give preference to the pretty and popular. We want to hang out with the cool kids, even as adults. We would never say it aloud, but we tend to sum up people, and determine if they are worth getting to know or worth our time. We judge people superficially, and God says it's wrong.

The New Testament book by James confronts this tendency. James was the brother of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> He did not believe his brother was the Messiah until after the resurrection.<sup>3</sup> But from that moment on, James was convinced and became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. James wrote one of the first letters in the New Testament, and addressed it to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion." "Dispersion" refers to the scattering of Jewish Christians due to persecution.<sup>4</sup> So, James wrote this letter to encourage them to persevere, to be faithful, and to hang on their faith.

James challenged his readers to be "***doers of the word, and not merely hearers.***" He said, "A hearer of the word and not a doer is like a man who looks intently at his face in a mirror, and after looking at himself, walks away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (James 1:22-24). That's absurd. No one looks in a mirror and then forgets what they look like. And it's absurd to look into God's word and not do what it says. A mirror shows us what we look like on the outside, but the word of God shows us what we look like on the inside. "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers." That challenge still stands. To look in the mirror of God's word and ask the question, ***does the life I live reflect the faith I profess?***

James confronted prejudice and preference because he grew up in the Jewish synagogue and had seen it time and time again. He had seen religion gone bad. He had witnessed the hypocrisy and ritualism. But this new faith was to be different. Jesus called His followers to a new standard of love. To love anyone and everyone. To take care of each other. To look out for the orphans and widows. To treat rich and poor the same. James reminds them of what he called "the royal law," and may this passage remind us as well.

"Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism ... If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin" (James 1:27-2:1, 8-9, NAS).

Love is the proof of true faith in Jesus Christ. As followers of Jesus and recipients of His undeserved grace, there is no place for prejudice or preference, for favoritism or partiality. As always, Jesus is our role model. *If Jesus loved the worst and the least, then so should we.*

### THE ROYAL LAW

James writes, “My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism” (James 2:1, NAS).

James was writing to Christians, to those who had received God’s undeserved grace, and who should know better. Every Christian should know that prejudice and preference are contrary to the Gospel and contrary to grace. Jesus loved the worst and the least. He sacrificed His life for the worst and the least. He died for the rich and poor, for the beautiful and the broken. He loved without prejudice and without preference. Everyone is equal at the cross, and everyone is welcome. Therefore, everyone should be welcome in our church, in our homes, and in our lives. Prejudice and favoritism are incompatible with God’s love. That’s not how He deals with people, and that’s not how we should deal with people. If Jesus loved the worst and the least, then so should we.

So, why did James write more about this issue than any other issue in his letter? Because he grew up in the Jewish synagogue and had seen it time and time again. It happened then, and it happens now. It’s human nature to prefer the pretty and the popular.

The Greek word for “favoritism” means to accept the face. It is to form an opinion of someone based upon appearance, or their perceived importance.<sup>5</sup> That guy’s rich; he’d make a great leader. That mom has cute kids; she should be in our small group. That guy’s a stud; that guy’s a geek. That girl is hot; that girl has a nice personality. By definition, favoritism is favoring some people over others. It’s valuing some more and valuing others less. Favoritism is like putting a price tag on people. It’s that ugly.

Thank God, that’s not how He deals with us. The Bible declares that “God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34, NIV). “There is no partiality with God” (Romans 2:11, NAS).<sup>6</sup> When the Lord instructed Samuel to find a new king for Israel, He said, “Do not consider his appearance or his height ... The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7, NIV).

James goes on to write, “If, however, you are fulfilling *the royal law* according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well” (James 2:8, NAS). This is the “royal law.” It is law of our King. It is the mark of citizens in His kingdom. It is proof that we belong to Him. Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35, NIV).

“But if you show partiality,” James writes, “you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. 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” (James 2:9-11, NAS). James was writing to religious people who kept

many of the commandments, yet they failed to love. And the point is that religious piety means nothing, if we do not love.<sup>7</sup>

Surely, James is repeating what he had heard his brother Jesus say. “Do not judge according to appearance” (John 7:24, NAS).

### TRUE RELIGION

James gave two examples of how we often violate this “royal law.”

The first example is in 1:27. “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27, NAS). James used the word “religion,” which is often a negative word, because we’ve seen the hypocrisy of religious people. But religion is a neutral word. It simply refers to how your beliefs shape your behavior. Religion gone bad becomes ritualistic, legalistic, and institutionalized. But in its simplest meaning, religion is how your beliefs shape your behavior.

And according to James, true religion includes something as practical as taking care of orphans and widows. You want to show how religious you are, then take care of orphans and widows. Orphans and widows were the most vulnerable in first century society, with no father and no husband to provide or protect. And James called for compassion for those who were the most vulnerable, who had suffered the loss of father and husband, those who were in “distress.” He was not talking about feeling sorry for them; he was talking about stepping up to help. He was talking about time and sacrifice. Christian love is not theoretical; it’s practical. It’s wonderful to see the adoption movement within the church today, and several of you have adopted children or provided foster care. Our church supports a children’s home in town. We support a crisis pregnancy center. We are looking into how we can better serve single moms. We also have an internal ministry called S.O.S. for “servants on standby.” We have about 40 people ready to help with any need a struggling family may have. James is challenging us to put our put religion into practice. He is saying, if you want to show how religious you are, then start with something as practical as taking care of orphans and widows.

The second example is in 2:2-4. “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, 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,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?” (James 2:2-4, NAS).<sup>8</sup> That’s the prejudice and preference James was talking about.

Stop giving rich men the best seats and making the poor sit in the back. If you are truly religious<sup>9</sup>, then ...

- “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves ... Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8-9, NIV).
- “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy ...” (Psalm 82:3-4, NIV).

- “Defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17, NAS).
- “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly” (Romans 12:16).

Prejudice and preference are contrary to the love of God. It’s contrary to the Gospel, to the grace God has showered on us. Jesus loved the worst and the least. He sacrificed His life for the worst and the least. He died for the rich and poor, for the beautiful and the broken. He loved without prejudice and without preference. Everyone is equal at the cross, and everyone is welcome. Therefore, everyone should be welcome in our church, in our homes, and in our lives. Favoritism is incompatible with God’s love. That’s not how He deals with people, and that’s not how we should deal with people. If Jesus loved the worst and the least, then so should we.

### SO SPEAK AND SO ACT

James ended this section with this challenge. “*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” (James 2:12-13, NAS).

Did you hear that? “Judgment will be merciless to the one who has shown no mercy.” We will be judged by the way we love. If our lives have been filled with prejudice and preference, we will be held accountable by God. We will be judged by how well we have loved.

I want to give us time to sit with this passage. To allow it to seep in. To allow it to confront us. We must do more than understand what this passage means; we must do what it says. Here are a few things I want you to think about.

1. Admit your prejudice. Is it blacks, Hispanics, Muslims? Who do you avoid? Who do you dislike? Who are you suspicious of?
2. Ask God to expose your preference. Do you tend to hang out with the pretty and popular? Do you tend to overlook people? Are you too busy with your own friends that you do not notice others around you?
3. Ask Him to help you love to the fullest extent. Love is the proof that we belong to God. Love is the proof that God’s heart is shaping our heart. Pray, “Lord, help me love to the fullest extent.”
4. Make room for people. To love those who are vulnerable, like orphans and widows. To love those who are considered the least, like the poor.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Here is the link to Susan Boyle's first audition on the television show *Britain's Got Talent*. Notice the audience's first reaction as she walks on stage, and then compare to the applause she received after she starts singing. [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5D5DgQi2oqA.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5D5DgQi2oqA)]

<sup>2</sup> According to Matthew 13:55, Jesus had four brothers, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and verse 13:56 also mentions sisters.

<sup>3</sup> See John 7:5, also 1 Corinthians 15:7.

<sup>4</sup> Peter also wrote to those who were "scattered" throughout the Mediterranean world (1 Peter 1:1).

<sup>5</sup> The Greek words in 2:1 and 2:9 are the same, προσωπολημψία.

<sup>6</sup> See Deuteronomy 10:17, Galatians 3:28.

<sup>7</sup> See 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

<sup>8</sup> See Luke 6:20, in which Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

<sup>9</sup> "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river" (Amos 5:21-24, NIV).