The End of Partiality

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The End of Partiality
Jeff Miller

My bookshelf boasts a well-worn copy of George Eldon Ladd’s textbook, *A Theology of the New Testament*. For three decades Ladd was an especially influential professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. One of my undergraduate professors had studied at Fuller during Ladd’s tenure and assigned this textbook for my 1989 college course, New Testament Theology. I remember the frustration I felt at Ladd’s ubiquitous use of the word *eschatological*. It first occurs on page 16 but is not explained until page 193 in a chapter titled, of course, “Eschatology.” To be clear, the problem was mine, not Ladd’s. I could have looked ahead in the book, and I should have carefully considered the contexts of his early uses of the word. Moreover, my professor, in addition to being an adherent of Ladd’s *inaugurated eschatology*, was also my father. Surely he would have answered my questions, giving me the proverbial fish or egg, rather than snake or scorpion?

My frustration arose, in large part, due to my misunderstanding. I thought that I knew what eschatology was, for two years earlier I had memorized and been tested on the standard definition: “the study of the last things,” as my freshman textbook put it. I now know that I was in need of a *fuller* definition, for eschatology is not only a look forward to final things, it is also a look around at present things. The testimony of the New Testament authors, and of the Lord himself, is that the last days have already begun. Indeed, because this new age has already begun, some eschatological investigation actually includes a look backward. For the New Testament authors it could involve looking back a few decades; for us it can involve looking back several centuries. Therefore, when we limit our eschatological thinking to questions about the Second Coming itself (its timing, its character, its results), we overlook the present and the past—roughly two-thirds of what a *fuller* eschatology should entail.

James, author of the epistle being studied in this *Leaven* Symposium, has woven eschatology into the fabric of his letter. The careful eye will first see it near the beginning. The letter body begins with mention of various trials, which call for joy (1.2) because they are the initial steps toward perseverance (1.3), maturity (1.4), wisdom (1.5), unwavering faith (1.6), and ultimately to the crown of life (1.12). Verse 12 again mentions the trials of verse 2, thus bracketing a unified section that ascends to the beatitude of verse 12: “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the LORD has promised to those who love him” (NIV).

Essential to this paper, and indeed to the epistle of James itself, is the inclusion of poor and rich in 1.9–11, which immediately precedes the section-ending promise of the crown of life:

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with

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scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. (NIV)

For James, the eschatological future (which includes the crown of life) is part of the same fabric with the eschatological present (which includes poverty and wealth). For James, Christians must act in the present like they will act in the future. Thus, for James, this ascent to the crown of life must successfully navigate questions of poverty and wealth. Consider, for example, James’s final chapter, which begins with a tightly interwoven discussion of eschatology and wealth, including the eschatological indictment, “You have hoarded wealth in the last days” (5.3 NIV).

This crown of life is the reward “that the LORD has promised to those who love him” (1.12 NIV). One way to view the remainder of the epistle of James is as a description of the character of “those who love him.” Chapter 2, the text for this paper, begins with a vivid yet brief parabolic presentation of the communal behavior of “those who love him.” Verse 1 establishes the parable’s theme with a prohibition against showing partiality: “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism” (NIV).

Partiality

The six-syllable prosōpolēmpsiain is a plural noun often translated “partiality” (RSV, ESV), often “favoritism” (NIV, CEB), and sometimes “prejudice” (NET). The NRSV rightly retains the plural with “acts of favoritism” (as opposed, for example, to NASB’s “an attitude of personal favoritism”). The first half of this compound word is the Greek noun prosōpon, meaning “face, countenance, appearance, presence.” The second half is from the Greek verb lambáno (or future lempsomai), which means “receive, take.” When these two words function in idiomatic tandem, receive face means “show (undue) favor(itism).” The idiom occurs, for example, in Leviticus 19.15 and Malachi 1.8. The compound word itself occurs four times in Paul’s letters, each averring that God does not “receive face.” God’s impartiality is similarly affirmed by a cognate noun in Acts 10.34 (“God is not one who shows partiality”) and by a negated adverbial cognate in 1 Peter 1.17 (“one who does not receive face”—i.e., one who judges impartially). The word’s verbal cognate is central to an ethical statement in James 2.9 (“if you receive face, you commit sin”). Thus we hear this compounding of words from several major New Testament voices—Paul, Luke, Peter, and James. It is no surprise, therefore, that these expressions are likely among “the earliest definitely Christian words.”

James’s specific command is not to “have/hold the faith” with partiality. Some translations render this idiom quite literally (“have not the faith,” KJV; “hold your faith,” NASB; “hold the faith,” RSV/ESV). That James speaks of faith in the Lord, rather than faith from the Lord or the faith of the Lord (i.e., Christ’s own faithfulness) seems clear enough and is supported by various dynamic equivalent translations (“believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,” NIV; “how can you claim that you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,” NLT; “do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” NRSV [italics added]).

This introductory command leads to the parable proper in verses 2–3:

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet . . .” (NIV)

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4. Greek receive face here translates the Hebrew idiom lift the faces (cf. Deuteronomy 10.17).
5. Romans 2.11; Galatians 2.6; Ephesians 6.9; Colossians 3.25
A thick commentary will have much to say about the details of these verses, and rightly so. But for our purposes the meaning is clear: The wealthy man is treated well; the poor man is treated poorly. The striking situation described in this parable, together with the subtitle of this symposium, *Practical Wisdom for Ministry*, prompts me to ask two especially practical questions about partiality.

**Contexts for Avoiding Partiality**

First, is wealth the only context in which Christians are forbidden from showing partiality? To be sure, James’s prohibition is in such a context. But does the broader voice of Scripture expand this context? The Leviticus text mentioned above is indeed in a context of wealth, but there we find a double prohibition: “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly” (Leviticus 19.15 NIV). This command, which describes partiality as a perversion of justice regardless of whether it favors the poor or the rich, must surely have been known to James. Moreover, it was likely in his mind as he composed chapter 2, for not only does he mimic its terminology, but his quotation of “the royal law”—“love your neighbor as yourself”—occurs in this same passage in James (2.8) and comes from the same passage in Leviticus (19.18).

Thus partiality based either on riches or poverty is forbidden, though James rightly sets his sights on the much more likely scenario—both in his own setting and in settings throughout the centuries. To further answer whether Scripture warns against partiality in contexts other than wealth, we turn to the four Pauline uses of *proσπολημψία*. In so doing, we find Paul disdaining partiality in three contexts other than poverty vs. wealth.

Romans 2.11 speaks against favoritism based on ethnicity—more specifically, the religious/ethnic divide between Jews and Gentiles. Paul gives a theological rationale, proclaiming that “there is no partiality with God” (2.11).

There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. (Romans 2.9–11 NIV)

Paul’s ban on “receiving face” on religious/ethnic grounds is echoed in Acts 10.34–35, where Peter, through the pen of Luke, says of Cornelius and his companions, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (NIV).

In Galatians 2.6, Paul gives the very same rational (“God does not show favoritism”), but in a different context. Here he states that he does not give special favor to those who are “held in high esteem” (2.6), naming James, Cephas, and John as key examples of those “esteemed as pillars” (2.9). Thus the context here in Galatians 2 is one of leadership and reputation, rather than religion and ethnicity.

In Ephesians 6.9, we read, “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him” (NIV). Similarly, Colossians 3.25 states, “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism” (NIV). Both these texts appear in discussions of slavery. Thus this third Pauline context of societal hierarchy is distinct from the religious/ethnic and leadership/reputation contexts of Romans and Galatians.

**Reasons for Avoiding Partiality**

A second question concerns the rationale for not showing partiality. *Why not* treat the rich with special favor? Why not give “respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due,” to borrow language from Paul? The answers to such questions indeed constitute practical wisdom for ministry because people are much more likely to accept advice when they know the reasons behind the advice.

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8. The second of these parallel prohibitions, “favoritism to the great,” is a similar metaphor, both in Hebrew (“honor the face”) and in Greek (“marvel at the face”).

9. James later utilizes this Leviticus 19 passage in 5.4, 9, 12, 20.

The first reason James gives is in verse 4, following immediately upon the parable proper: “have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” This rhetorical question prompts an affirmative answer (as do all four questions in this passage), on the basis of both grammar and common sense—common sense, at least, for the mature Christians in James’s audience and beyond, though not always for the typical Roman (or American, etc.). That discriminate is qualified by among yourselves implies that the two characters are both Christians and perhaps also both regular participants in this Christian community. Thus we could refer to them as “attendees” rather than “visitors,” and we can read the parable as a plausible, though perhaps hyperbolic, scenario in any number of Christian gatherings in James’s sphere of influence (recalling the vastness of the epistle’s audience, “To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” [1.1 NIV]).

James then asserts that such discriminating behavior is carried out by “judges with evil thoughts.” His use of evil is indeed strong language, and he elsewhere reserves for God the right to judge. Nevertheless, it is not judging itself which is forbidden, but judging “with evil thoughts.” “Thoughts” is the rendering of dialogismos found in KJV, NRSV, ESV, NIV, etc. The reference could focus on the beginning of evil thoughts (hence NASB’s motives), but it seems more likely that the results of judging are here in view (hence verdicts). In a college class I teach on the book of Acts, one assignment is to write an ecclesiology. One student’s first draft included the unqualified statement, “The church must not judge.” I was pleased to see a change in her next draft: “The church must not close its doors to anyone—regardless of ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc.” One commentary capsulizes James’s point especially well: “When we attempt to discern people’s value based on external features, we not only try to usurp God’s role as judge, but we fail miserably in the process.”

The second reason James gives is in verses 5–6a. This second rhetorical question begins with an emphatic, yet affectionate, direct address: “Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor” (NIV).

“In the eyes of the world” (an expanded translation of “in the world”) contains a vital warning: If we see the poor as poor, and the rich as rich, we see as the world sees. In contrast, God views the poor as rich and the rich as poor! Thus James here calls us to an apocalyptic perspective—that is, an unveiled worldview in which we grow to see as God sees.

One can hardly miss James’s allusion to the best-known of Jesus’s beatitudes. It is important to notice that James here echoes the Lukan expression of the beatitude, which does not include the Matthean modifier in spirit: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6.20 NIV, italics added). In several translations, verse 6’s “But you have dishonored the poor” instead ends with “the poor man,” and rightly so because the original Greek word translated to “the poor” is singular. This claim functions like the words of

11. Verses 2–3, the parable proper, are the compound protasis of a conditional sentence: “If a man enters…..” Verse 4 is the apodosis: “then have you not…?”
12. For example, see Craig S. Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 694.
15. McKnight goes beyond hyperbolic, calling James’s example “graphic and almost ridiculous” (175, cf. 180–81).
16. “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” (4.12 NIV).
17. See Dan G. McCartney, James, Baker Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 140, 144. Some scholars have argued that James’s parable is set in a judicial gathering, as opposed to a worship gathering. See, for example, Blomberg and Kamell, 110–11. I follow McKnight (186) and Painter (90, passim), among others, who argue for a worship setting.
19. ESV, RSV, NASB, NLT, etc.
the prophet Nathan. David is confronted with the words, “You are the man!” and thereby confesses and repents. Though James’s hearers may never have literally given special treatment to a man with gold rings, many of them—and many of us—have acted similarly. This brief emphatic sentence is a call to confession and repentance.

The third reason James gives is in verses 6b–7: “Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?” Here we have direct accusations against the rich. Before, the criticism was of those who show favoritism to the rich; criticism of the rich themselves was only implied. James’s first reason was about those who would show partiality. His second reason focused on the poor. This third reason turns to the rich and their behavior.

Are these badly-behaved rich people to be viewed as Christians? Earlier, I argued that the two individuals—the parable’s rich man and poor man—are presented as Christians as opposed to outsiders or guests because the partiality directed at them causes James to ask, “Have you not discriminated among yourselves?” Here in verses 6–7, however, we read that the rich have exploited poor Christians, even dragging some into court, and also blasphemed the noble name. Are we to understand, therefore, that the rich man in the parable is himself guilty of such offenses? I think not—remembering, of course, that he is a hypothetical and parabolic man with no actual history. I believe that James’s teaching remains primarily targeted at the other person in the parable: the usher, we might call him. Though the anti-wealth rhetoric has heightened as the paragraph has progressed, it is still primarily about partiality. The import, therefore, of James’s third stated reason is that those in Christ should not judge based on worldly standards. To evaluate a Christian brother or sister based on wealth is to evaluate based on a category which has no meaning in Christ.

The fourth reason James gives is in verses 8–11:

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. (NIV)

The “royal law” is from Leviticus 19.18, which ends with “I am Yahweh.” Such appeals to the divine name are found repeatedly throughout Leviticus, especially in chapters 18–26. Though James does not include this tag in his own quotation, its ubiquitous presence in Leviticus suggests that “the noble name” mentioned in James 2.7 is indeed Yahweh. James elsewhere (like various New Testament authors) uses kūrios (Greek lord) in imitation of the tradition of pronouncing adonai (Hebrew lord) in place of the divine name Yahweh. Why should one love one’s neighbor as one’s self? Because, says the LORD, “I am Yahweh.” God’s people must imitate God’s attitudes and actions. Thus not loving one’s neighbor as one’s self is an affront to the person, the character, and euphemistically to the name of Yahweh. Loving one’s neighbor is a distinctive of Israel because worshiping Yahweh is a distinctive of Israel. Leviticus commentator Tim Willis describes this function of the divine name well: “The divine self-declaration formula [“I am Yahweh”] contributes to this call for distinctiveness. This formula carries three main implications in Leviticus. The first is a link to the exodus, along with a call for holiness. . . . A corollary implication is that the people will emulate the Lord’s character in their own lives. They will be holy as he is holy.”

20. 2 Samuel 12.7.
21. As mentioned above, 1.11b says, “the rich will fade away even while they go about their business” (NIV). Here, as is common in James, a theme of chapters 2–5 is foreshadowed in chapter 1.
22. 5.4 (NIV): “Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the LORD Almighty.” 5.10 (NIV): “Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the LORD.” 5.14 (NIV). “Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the LORD.” Italics added.
In verses 10–11, James bolsters the importance of the royal law by reminding his hearers that to break one law is to break the law. Willis again says it well: “The general context [of Leviticus 18–20] suggests that the violation of one of these commands defiles the believer as much as violation of any other command defiles. All derive from the same foundation, ‘I am the Lord your God.’”

**Conclusion**

Though Scripture forbids partiality of various kinds, James here focuses on partiality to the rich, giving four reasons for the end of such behavior. First, Christians must not usurp God’s role as judge; to do so is to discriminate and inevitably leads to evil verdicts. Second, Christians must honor whom God honors; this includes the poor, whom Christ welcomed into his kingdom. Third, to be frank, when the rich exploit the poor, God is offended. And fourth, that part of the Torah which best translates to kingdom living—the royal law, “Love your neighbor as yourself”—points an accusing finger at the rich.

Moving forward to 2.12–13, James’s rationale arrives at its climax: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (NIV). This section-closing statement returns to an eschatological theme. Thus we are reminded that all of James’s reasons for ending partiality are but subsets of the broader rationale—eschatology.

James’s main point, therefore, is that we must live now like we will live then. To the best of our limited abilities—more accurately, to the best of our Spirit-empowered abilities—we must live in the present as we will live in eternity. Finally, though I have called these final verses a climax, in a sense they are not a climax at all, for some aspects of life in the new age are not actually all that new. After all, way back in Leviticus, God called for the end of partiality.

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24. Willis, 172–73.