Προσωπολημψία (Favouritism) in James 2:1–13: A Historical-Critical And Theological Reading of Partiality in the Christian Community

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Abstract
This article undertakes a historical-critical and theological reading of James 2:1–13, which is the New Testament's most sustained treatment of favouritism (προσωπολημψία) within the Christian assembly. Taking the passage as the unit of analysis, the study argues that James' prohibition of partiality is not simply an instruction concerning interpersonal courtesy. Instead, it is a theological critique of social discrimination within the church. Employing the historical-critical method which encompasses textual criticism, lexical and grammatical analysis, and reconstruction of the socio-economic world of wealth, status, and patronage in the first-century Mediterranean, the article traces the internal logic of James' argument across five movements: the Christological ground of the prohibition (2:1), the concrete anatomy of favouritism (2:2–4), the theological warrant of God's election of the poor (2:5–7), the royal law of neighbour-love (2:8–11), and the eschatological resolution of judgment and mercy (2:12–13). The findings indicate that James bases his ethics on Christology, the nature of God, the Torah, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Resultantly, he presents an integrated theological argument rather than simply giving out advice about good behaviour. The study offers a framework for interpreting social discrimination, not only as a sociological issue in the Christian community but as a theological issue with consequences for current ecclesial practice.

Keywords: *Favouritism, Honour-Shame, Partiality, Royal Law, Social Justice.*

1. Introduction

Christian communities across history have repeatedly struggled with the temptation to grant deference to the wealthy, the influential, and the socially prominent. On the other hand, they treat the poor and the unconnected with comparative indifference. Seating arrangements within Christian gatherings revolve around status, and leadership opportunities are sometimes reserved for major donors. Pastoral attention weighs toward the socially useful, and public honour extends to those who can enhance a congregation's profile. All these are recognisable patterns of contemporary church life. What is striking is that this precise configuration of behaviour is the subject of one of the most vivid scenes in the New Testament where James describes a wealthy visitor ushered to a seat of honour while a poor visitor is told to stand, or to sit on the floor (Jas. 2:2–3). The fact that favouritism has continued over the two millennia of the church indicates that the matter discussed in James 2:1–13 is not merely a problem relating to first-century synagogue customs but is instead a long-standing theological debate whose reasoning still shows the church's vulnerability to worldly standards of value. James 2:1–13 has drawn a great deal of scholarly discussion, and most commentators agree that it condemns προσωπολημψία (favouritism, partiality) because it is incompatible with true Christian faith. Moo (2000) and McKnight (2011) see the prohibition of favouritism as being part of James' broader concern for the poor and as a response to a church culture affected by Greco-Roman patronage. Davids (1982) and Johnson (2005) interpret the passage as an argument based on the unity and authority of God's law. Meanwhile, Witherington III (2007) and Hartin (2003) stress its connection with kingdom theology. Bauckham (1999) places James in the Old Testament prophetic tradition, which associates true worship with justice for the vulnerable. These readings converge on the conclusion that favouritism is sinful, yet they differ in where they locate the theological centre of gravity of James' argument. The centre is either Christology, covenant law, kingdom ethics, or social justice. A recurring limitation in much of this scholarship is the tendency to treat James 2:1–13 primarily through a single interpretive lens. It is treated either as a case study in Greco-Roman patronage and honour-shame culture (deSilva, 2000; Malina, 2001) or as a paraenetic passage whose force is largely social and behavioural rather than doctrinal. Comparatively, less attention has been given to demonstrating how the passage's argument is theologically integrated. The Christological confession of 2:1, the theology of divine election in 2:5–7, the Torah ethic of 2:8–11, and the eschatology of 2:12–13 combine into a single, cumulative case that discrimination within the church is not a lapse in etiquette but a contradiction of the character of God himself. This article addresses that gap by offering a historical-critical and theological reading that follows the passage's own argumentative movement from confession, through illustration and theological warrant, to eschatological climax. The study is based on four questions: What is the meaning of James 2:1–13 in light of its historical and literary background? What is the kind of partiality that James opposes? How do the royal law and the idea of judgment and mercy contribute to deepening James's argument? And what theological view of social justice can be derived from the passage? The article contends that James' ban on favouritism is not simply a directive about interpersonal politeness but a theological criticism of social discrimination within the Christian community. It is a criticism that is grounded both in Christology, in the nature of God, in the royal law of the Scriptures, and in the certainty of eschatological judgment tempered by mercy.

2. Literary and Historical Setting of James 2:1–13

2.1 Authorship, Date, and Occasion

The epistle identifies its author as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Jas. 1:1) but critical scholarship is divided on the matter. While the New Testament identifies several men by this name, the scholars identify the author with the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church (Johnson, 2005; Moo, 2000; McKnight, 2011; Allison, 2013; Davids, 2013). This identification is supported by the brevity of the self-introduction, which presupposes an author of recognised authority in the church requiring no further explanation (Moo, 2000; Dibelius, 1976; McKnight, 2011). By the letter's pronounced affinities with the teaching of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount (Jas. 2:5//Matt. 5:3; Jas. 1:22–27//Matt. 7:21–27; Jas. 3:17–18//Matt. 5:9; Jas. 5:1–6//Matt. 6:19–24) and the external testimony from Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome (Davids, 2013; Painter & deSilva, 2012), James the brother of Jesus is acclaimed the author although Eusebius lists it among the disputed books. On the question of date, the epistle's strong Jewish character, its use of συναγωγή rather than ἐκκλησία for the Christian gathering (Jas. 2:2), its silence regarding the Jerusalem Council and the Gentile-inclusion controversy of Acts 15, and its lack of reference to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 together favour an early composition. Most plausibly between AD 45 and 62, during James' leadership of the Jerusalem church prior to his martyrdom (Dibelius, 1976; Johnson, 2005; Davids, 2013; Painter & deSilva, 2012). The letter is addressed to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (Jas. 1:1), a designation most naturally read as Jewish-Christian communities scattered throughout the Roman world (Johnson, 2005; Moo, 2000). Since the recipient belonged to a minority population within a predominantly Gentile environment, they were exposed to social and economic pressures. The pressure plausibly generated the temptation of showing deference toward wealthy and influential figures capable of offering patronage, protection, or advantage (Hays, 2020).

2.2 Literary Context within the Epistle

James 2:1–13 is not an isolated ethical paraenesis. It functions within a deliberate argumentative sequence. The passage develops directly out of James' definition of "pure and undefiled religion" in 1:26–27 (controlled speech, care for orphans and widows, and freedom from worldly contamination), which several commentators regard as a thematic summary of the letter's ethical concerns (Moo, 2000; Johnson, 2013). If authentic religion requires active concern for society's most vulnerable, then discrimination against the poor in favour of the wealthy is a direct contradiction of that religion (McKnight, 2019). Witherington III (2007) similarly reads favouritism as an intrusion of worldly status-consciousness into the assembly, an intrusion that James treats as evidence that believers have failed to remain "unstained by the world."

The passage also anticipates the discussion of faith and works in 2:14–26. Davids (2013) and McKnight (2019) argue that the two sections form a unified argument about the practical expression of faith. Hence, favouritism illustrates the gap between profession and conduct that James later generalises in his critique of a faith that produces no works (Hartin, 2003). Both sections expose the same underlying problem, which is a faith that does not translate into concrete ethical action toward the vulnerable (Dibelius, 1976). Concern for the poor runs through the whole epistle (1:9–11; 2:1–7, 14–17; 5:1–6). James 2:1–13 occupies a central place within this concern by addressing the practical consequences of economic inequality inside the Christian assembly (Bauckham, 1999; Longenecker, 2010). The passage also develops the letter's wider theme of integrity. It argues that belief and behaviour cohere, and this is expressed through the recurrent vocabulary of τέλειος ("complete," or "whole" as used in 1:4, 17, 25; 2:22; 3:2). Favouritism from

this perspective is a concrete instance of the double-mindedness James condemns throughout the letter. It is a divided loyalty between allegiance to Christ and conformity to worldly standards (Johnson, 2005; McKnight, 2019). Also, the passage is framed by James' vision of the kingdom of God, where the poor are "heirs of the kingdom" (2:5), and the prohibition of favouritism is grounded in the conviction that the church is called to embody God's alternative social order rather than the status hierarchies of the surrounding culture (Moo, 2000; Wright, 2019).

2.3 Textual Criticism of James 2:1–13

The text of James 2:1–13 is fairly stable, but two variants are worth noting since they have an impact on interpretation. First, in James 2:3, a minor variation exists regarding the treatment of the poor visitor. The text according to Nestle-Aland 28th Edition (NA28) reads καὶ ἐπιβλέψητε ἐπὶ τὸν φοροῦντα τὴν ἐσθῆτα τὴν λαμπρὰν καὶ εἴπητε· σὺ κάθου ὧδε καλῶς, καὶ τῷ πτωχῷ εἴπητε· σὺ στῆθι ἐκεῖ ἢ κάθου ὑπὸ τὸ ὑποπόδιόν μου (and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "Have a seat here, please," while you say to the poor man, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet"). According to Metzger (1971), some manuscripts simplify the command to the poor man by repositioning ἢ κάθου and expand it using accompanying words. Manuscripts A, Ψ read στῆθι ἐκεῖ ἢ κάθου, while manuscripts K, L, P, 69, 1424 read στῆθι ἐκεῖ ἢ κάθου ὧδε. Manuscript B reads στῆθι ἢ κάθου ἐκεῖ, while manuscript C* reads στῆθι ἐκεῖ καὶ κάθου. Also, C² reads στῆθι ἐκεῖ καὶ κάθου ὧδε. This position is also supported by Robinson and Pierpont (2018). However, shorter readings enjoy stronger support from early manuscripts, including ℵ, A, and B. The longer reading appears primarily in later Byzantine witnesses and is attributed to scribal activities. Metzger (1994) argues that scribes likely expanded the text to intensify the humiliation of the poor man. This tendency toward explanatory additions is common in New Testament manuscript transmission. Davids (2013) agrees that the shorter reading is preferable because it satisfies the principle of lectio brevior. Second, in 2:4 the negative particle οὐ preceding διεκρίθητε. The majority of manuscripts, including the most significant early witnesses, contain οὐ διεκρίθητε, forming a rhetorical question that expects no affirmative answer (Aland et al., 2012). This is the reading found in NA28 and the ECM. According to Holmes (2010), Codex Sinaiticus (ℵ*) and a few other manuscripts omit the οὐ, which would turn the phrase into a statement rather than a rhetorical question: you have made distinctions among yourselves... The inclusion of οὐ is critical for the verse's interrogative force, strongly condemning the partiality. The ECM (2nd ed.) maintains the negative particle based on its high "coherence" score within the manuscript tradition, indicating its strong support across various manuscript families (Wasserman and Gurry, 2017). Also, McKnight (2011) emphasises that the verb διεκρίθητε here denotes the internal inconsistency or wavering of the community, mirroring the double-mindedness of James 1:6-8. Hence, the omission of οὐ would lessen the directness of James' rebuke. Simply put, the presence of οὐ is most probable. Third, the form κατακαυχᾶται (triumphs, third person singular) is chosen over the less common reading κατακαυχᾶσθε (you boast, second person plural) since it is supported by the earliest manuscripts (ℵ, A, B) and is used in NA28 and the ECM (Aland et al., 2012; Holmes, 2010). The use of the singular turns the statement into a general, aphoristic principle in which mercy is seen as a universal characteristic of God's dealings with humanity rather than as a direct accusation. It also provides an appropriate and hopeful ending to the pericope (Wasserman & Gurry, 2017). None of these variants alters the theological substance of the passage. Together, they confirm the integrity of the received text and where they bear on interpretation, reinforce rather than complicate the reading (Metzger 1994).

3. The Socio-Economic World of Honour, Wealth, and Patronage

James' condemnation of favouritism cannot be well understood apart from the social conventions of the first-century Mediterranean world. Greco-Roman society was stratified along lines of birth, wealth, citizenship, and patronage. Senators, equites, and local elites enjoyed privileged access to honour, office, and judicial process. The common population (artisans, labourers, and the poor) occupied subordinate and often precarious positions (deSilva, 2000; Garnsey and Saller, 2014). Wealth was more than just a means of ensuring economic security; it served as the main visible sign of honour and social status, since the wealthy obtained recognition through euergetism, which is public benefaction, and in return for their generosity, they received inscriptions, titles, and public acclaim (Malina, 2001; Johnson, 2013). On the other hand, poverty was accompanied by social stigma and often involved a state of vulnerability to exploitation, indebtedness, and the loss of land (Longenecker, 2010; McKnight, 2011). The patron-client relationship was present in almost every area of social life. Patrons provided protection, resources, and opportunities for advancement, and in return, clients showed loyalty, honour, and gave public acclaim (deSilva, 2000; Mbamalu, 2013). A rich visitor attending a Christian gathering might reasonably have been seen as a potential patron, since his support would have brought real benefits to the community. This accounts for, although does not justify, the temptation that James addresses (Bindell, 2013; Verbin, 1999). In the Greco-Roman society, seating was never neutral. At theatres, banquets, and in public assemblies, seats of distinction meant honour while less important positions meant shame (Millar, 1993; Dunbabin, 2003). In some synagogues seats were set aside for elders and other prominent members (Levine, 2000), and so when James's picture of a poor visitor being told to 'stand there' or 'sit at my feet' (2:3) was understood by his original readers, it brought before them a situation full of social significance in which the poor man was placed in a position similar to that of a servant or a conquered enemy (Bauckham, 1999). When read against this background, James' prohibition is not an abstract ideal, but a direct confrontation of the cultural tradition which the community had brought into its everyday life.

4. Method

This study employs the historical-critical method as its primary exegetical approach, understood as the effort to interpret a text within the historical circumstances that produced it and to recover the meaning intended for its original audience (Gorman, 2010; Powell, 2009). This is combined with close lexical and grammatical analysis of key terms such as *προσωπολημψία*, *πίστις*, *νόμος βασιλικός*, *ἔλεος*, and *κρίσις*. Textual criticism was used to establish the most probable original wording of the passage (Metzger & Ehrman, 2005; Wasserman & Gurry, 2017). The socio-historical reconstruction of honour, wealth, and patronage supplies the cultural framework within which James' argument would have been heard by its first audience. The exegetical analysis proceeds through the passage's five natural movements — prohibition (2:1), illustration (2:2–4), theological warrant (2:5–7), legal warrant (2:8–11), and eschatological resolution (2:12–13). Thereafter, the results are synthesised into a coherent theological argument.

5. Exegetical Analysis of James 2:1–13

James does not treat favouritism as a minor interpersonal failure. He constructs an argument in which the problem is examined successively from Christological, social, theological, legal, and eschatological angles (McKnight, 2011; Moo, 2000). Each movement of the passage adds a distinct case against partiality, so that by 2:13, favouritism stands convicted on multiple, mutually reinforcing grounds.

5.1 The Prohibition and Its Christological Ground (2:1)

> Ἀδελφοί μου, μὴ ἐν προσωπολημψίαις ἔχετε τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης (Nestle and Aland, 2006).
> "My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (RSV, 1971).

The pericope opens with a direct thesis statement where favouritism is staunchly prohibited (Blomberg & Kamell, 2008). James does not simply say 'do not show favouritism' but asserts that favouritism is incompatible with holding genuine faith in Christ. The noun *προσωπολημψία* derives from *πρόσωπον* (face, appearance, or person) and *λαμβάνω* (to receive). Literally, it means receiving the face, which implies judging a person on the basis of external characteristics such as wealth, status, or appearance rather than on moral or spiritual grounds (Diggle, 2021). Its use in the Septuagint (Deut. 1:17; Prov. 24:23) describes judicial or social bias, rendering judgment on the basis of who a person is rather than on justice or merit. Moo (2000) points out, this is based on the Hebrew expression nāśā' pānîm (to lift up the face), a phrase which is often used to indicate partiality in legal situations (Deut. 10:17; Lev. 19:15). The fact that James employs the plural form προσωπολημψίαις indicates that it is not merely a one-off mistake but rather a repeated pattern of discriminatory behaviour, showing an ongoing bias rather than just a single ethical failing (Allison, 2013; McKnight, 2011). The Christological force of the verse lies in the appositional phrase *τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης* (our Lord Jesus Christ, [the Lord] of glory). James deliberately contrasts the glory that belongs properly to Christ with the misplaced honour the assembly confers on the wealthy (Moo, 2000; McKnight, 2011). Manton (2001) notes that James links belief in Christ directly with the rejection of social discrimination. The issue he deals with goes beyond a lack of good manners and concerns a failure to understand the implications of being loyal to the 'Lord of glory'. Blomberg and Kamell (2008) situate this within a church culture influenced by patronage, in which wealthy people usually got preferential treatment because of the economic and political power they had. James opposes this kind of consideration since Christian fellowship is based on grace and not on patronage. The command, though addressed to a particular first-century situation, is framed as a theological syllogism: Christ is Lord of glory; God shows no partiality; therefore, believers who belong to Christ must show none either. Favouritism is thus classified from the outset as sin (2:9), a contradiction to the claim of Christian faith itself.

5.2 The Anatomy of Favouritism (2:2–4)

> ἐὰν γὰρ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν ὑμῶν ἀνὴρ χρυσοδακτύλιος ἐν ἐσθῆτι λαμπρᾷ, εἰσέλθῃ δὲ καὶ πτωχὸς ἐν ῥυπαρᾷ ἐσθῆτι... (Nestle and Aland, 2006).
> "For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in..." (RSV, 1971).

James bases the prohibition of favouritism on a specific example. Two people go into the συναγωγή, a term which, in this case, refers to an early Christian meeting that still follows Jewish communal customs (Levine, 2000). One of them is marked by χρυσοδακτύλιος (gold ring) and ἐσθὴς λαμπρά (fine clothing), while the other is described as πτωχός, a term that means not only having modest means but actually being in a state of destitution and social vulnerability. This is different from πένης, the working-poor (Diggle, 2021; Johnson, 2013). The assembly offers the richer visitor a position of honour and tells the poorer one to stand or to 'sit at my feet', thus carrying out exactly the kind of discrimination that the first verse had prohibited.

The verb *διεκρίθητε* (you have made distinctions) from *διακρίνω* in verse 4 possesses a deliberate double sense. Discrimination against others and internal division within the community are the

same act described from two angles (Davids, 2013). A church that practises favouritism does not merely wrong an individual but also fractures its own unity. James' closing question in this unit, *κριταὶ διαλογισμῶν πονηρῶν* (judges with evil thoughts or judges with corrupt reasoning), accuses the community of usurping a judicial role it has no standing to exercise, and of doing so on the basis of worldly rather than divine criteria (McCartney, 2009). McKnight (2011) interprets the scene as a clash between two different methods of judging a person's value. Whereas society judges individuals by the things they have, God judges them on the basis of their position before him. Moo (2000) argues that the sin is not in extending hospitality to the rich visitor but rather in the corresponding degradation of the poor visitor. The issue is one of comparison and of a structural nature, not simply a matter of showing courtesy to one guest. Blomberg and Kamell (2008) situate the episode within the patron-client expectations of the Roman world, in which communities customarily calculated the social usefulness of a wealthy newcomer. James completely rejects this kind of assessment, maintaining that every person has God-given dignity regardless of what they can offer. These observations demonstrate that James 2:2–4 goes beyond individual attitudes and reveals a structural pattern in which access, recognition, and honour are given according to a person's social status. This pattern can be recognised in modern institutions, including churches, just as it was in the first-century assembly.

5.3 God's Character and the Election of the Poor (2:5–7)

> Ακούσατε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί. οὐχ ὁ θεὸς ἐξελέξατο τοὺς πτωχοὺς τοῦ κόσμου πλουσίους ἐν πίστει καὶ κληρονόμους τῆς βασιλείας... (Nestle and Aland, 2006).
>
> "Listen, my beloved brethren. 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?" (RSV, 1971).

Having exposed the community's actions in 2:2–4, James gives a theological justification for his prohibition. The way the church treats the poor is in direct contradiction to how God Himself treats the marginalised. The verb ἐξελέξατο (has chosen, from ἐκλέγομαι) makes God, and not human society, the subject performing the evaluation (Diggle, 2021). Dibelius (1976) links this with the pattern in the Old Testament in which God is repeatedly seen as identifying with the weak, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed. James is not saying that poverty automatically brings about righteousness, nor that wealth is in itself sinful (McCartney, 2009; Manton, 2001); rather, Moo (2000) maintains that James notices a recurring pattern that those who cannot count on worldly security are more easily open to God's grace. James presents a paradox that the materially poor may be πλουσίους ἐν πίστει (rich in faith). This redefines wealth in spiritual terms and directly contradicts the congregation's belief that one's economic position corresponds to divine favour or social respect (Du Toit, 2020). The word κληρονόμος (heir) means that the poor are not seen as passive recipients of charity but as participants in God's promised future, while τῆς βασιλείας refers to the eschatological reign of God, during which current social judgments are reversed (Brown, 2019). The adversative δὲ serves to highlight the contrast. Although God has chosen the poor, the assembly has ἠτιμάσατε (dishonoured or treated shamefully) them. James strengthens his criticism by pointing out that it is often the rich who καταδυναστεύουσιν (oppress or exploit) the believers, who ἕλκουσιν (drag) the poor into court by means of legal manipulation, and who βλασφημοῦσιν (blaspheme) the very name by which the believers are known (Davids, 2013; Johnson, 2005). The irony that James reveals is serious in that the church dishonours the poor whom God honours, while it honours the rich who dishonour Christ. Thus, James 2:5–7

shows that favouritism is not merely unkind but a theological contradiction since it reverses the pattern of divine election and shows a community that has substituted society's hierarchy for that of the kingdom (McKnight, 2019; Hartin, 2003).

5.4 The Royal Law of Love (2:8–11)

> Εἰ μέντοι νόμον τελεῖτε βασιλικόν κατὰ τὴν γραφήν, Ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν, καλῶς ποιεῖτε· εἰ δὲ προσωπολημπτεῖτε, ἁμαρτίαν ἐργάζεσθε... (Nestle and Aland, 2006).
>
> "If you really fulfil the royal law, according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself,' you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors" (RSV, 1971).

James now shifts from theological justification of his argument to a legal justification, elevating the command to love your neighbour as yourself (Lev. 19:18) to the status of *νόμος βασιλικός (*royal law). The precise force of *βασιλικός* has generated scholarly discussion. It may describe a law that originates from the King (God), a law that is sovereign over other laws, or a law befitting a king in its nobility (Moo, 2000). Witherington III (2007) and McKnight (2011) have interpreted the adjective in James' kingdom theology in such a way that the command serves as the ethical standard for those who are part of God's reign, an interpretation which is in agreement with the language of the kingdom previously presented in 2:5. The two interpretations do not contradict one another. The law is regarded as royal since it comes from the divine King, applies to the citizens of his kingdom, and stands above all the other ethical requirements (McCartney, 2009). James's logic is direct in that he argues that love fulfils the law (v. 8), while favouritism violates it (v. 9); and because the law is a unified whole, transgressing even a single command (however comparatively minor it may appear) renders one accountable to the whole law (vv. 10–11). The fact that the verb προσωπολημπτεῖτε in verse 9, the active form corresponding to the noun in 2:1, shows that James now explicitly refers to the practice as ἁμαρτία, sin, and thus leaves no room for the common cultural belief that showing deference to the wealthy was nothing remarkable (Georges and Baker, 2016). By citing the Decalogue's prohibitions of adultery and murder (v. 11) alongside favouritism, James is not equating the relative social severity of these acts, but demonstrating that all violations of the law constitute rebellion against the same divine Lawgiver (Johnson, 2005; Bauckham, 1999). Bauckham (1999) frames this through the lens of covenant theology. For him, to break any command is to breach covenant fidelity as a whole, which explains why James treats favouritism with such gravity and not as a lapse in manners, but as a breach of loyalty to God himself. The theological core of James' argument is found in this section. Favouritism is rejected not simply because it offends a poor person or because it is socially inappropriate, but since it amounts to disobedience of the supreme command by which the entire Torah is summed up and fulfilled. The passage shows that social ethics and loyalty to the covenant cannot be separated. The way believers treat the poor is the practical way of testing whether they really keep God's law (Hartin, 2003; Moo, 2000).

5.5 Judgment and Mercy: The Eschatological Climax (2:12–13)

> Οὕτως λαλεῖτε καὶ οὕτως ποιεῖτε ὡς διὰ νόμου ἐλευθερίας μέλλοντες κρίνεσθαι. ἡ γὰρ κρίσις ἀνέλεος τῷ μὴ ποιήσαντι ἔλεος· κατακαυχᾶται ἔλεος κρίσεως (Nestle and Aland, 2006).

> "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment" (RSV, 1971).

The climax of the passage is achieved by shifting the focus from social ethics to eschatological accountability. The two present imperatives, λαλεῖτε and ποιεῖτε, stress that both what people say and what they do must meet the same standard. Thus, once again reflecting James' well-known attitude of rejecting the idea of separating belief from behaviour (McKnight, 2019). The expression νόμος ἐλευθερίας (law of liberty), which was first mentioned in 1:25, should be seen as God's moral will that has been fulfilled through Christ. It is not a legalistic obligation but a liberating standard which enables believers to live in accordance with God's purposes, especially as this is shown in the practice of mercy (Moo, 2000; Hartin, 2003; McKnight, 2011).

James supports the imperative with a rare adjective, *ἀνέλεος* (merciless, occurring only here in the New Testament). *Κρίσις ἀνέλεος (*judgment without mercy) awaits *τῷ μὴ ποιήσαντι ἔλεος* (the one who has shown no mercy). According to Johnson (2005) and Manton (2000), the statement echoes the Matthean beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matt. 5:7) and functions not as a claim that mercy earns salvation but as an assertion that mercy reveals the authenticity of a professed relationship with God (Bauckham, 1999; Flesher, 2018). The community's treatment of the poor thereby becomes, in James' argument, a test case for genuine faith. The final aphorism, ἔλεος κατακαυχᾶται κρίσεως (mercy triumphs over judgment), presents mercy as a winning force that overcomes strict justice (McKnight, 2011). There is a disagreement among scholars as to whether James is mainly referring to human mercy as proof of faith (Johnson, 2005; McKnight, 2019) or to divine mercy as the foundation of hope (Moo, 2000). Witherington III (2007) proposes that mercy functions not as judgment's opposite but as its defining and tempering characteristic. What all these readings share is the recognition that James closes his argument against favouritism not merely with a warning but with a promise: a community shaped by God's own mercy is called, and equipped, to become a community of mercy in turn — the practical and permanent antidote to the discrimination the passage as a whole has condemned.

6. Discussion: Theological Critique of Social Discrimination

When read as a continuous argument rather than a series of loosely connected exhortations, James 2:1–13 reveals five different grounds against favouritism, each of which is considered in turn as the passage unfolds: a Christological ground (2:1), based on the inconsistency between confessing the 'Lord of glory' and showing people respect according to their worldly status; a social-structural ground (2:2–4), which shows that favouritism both discriminates against individuals and destroys the unity of the community; a theological ground (2:5–7), because of the nature of God, who is impartial (as stated in Rom. 2:11 and Acts 10:34) and who chooses the poor as heirs of his kingdom; a legal ground (2:8–11), since showing favouritism amounts to a breach of the royal law that sums up the entire Torah; and an eschatological ground (2:12–13), which places the community's current behaviour under the assurance of future judgment but with the presence of mercy. No single unit of the argument, when taken alone, would carry the full weight of James' argument. Their cumulative force is what elevates favouritism from a social misjudgement to a theological crisis. This reading resists two common reductions of the passage. The first treats James 2:1–13 primarily as an exercise in first-century social description, which accounts for patronage and honour-shame convention (deSilva, 2000; Malina, 2001). While such socio-historical reconstruction is indispensable for understanding the concrete referents of James' illustration, it cannot by itself explain why James treats the practice as sin (2:9) rather than merely

as a poor custom. The second reduction treats the passage as an appeal to interpersonal courtesy. That is a call to be kind and inclusive toward newcomers regardless of appearance. While this account is true, it understates the theological significance of the passage. For James, it is not a matter of courtesy but one of Christology, the nature of God, the covenant law, and eschatology; favouritism is, according to James himself, a sin since it goes against who God is and what God has done, not just because it is unkind. The way this theological interpretation affects the church's understanding of social justice is considerable. Since the basis of James' argument is theological and not simply social, the practice of impartiality among Christians cannot be seen as an optional show of compassion. It must be regarded as a fundamental feature of true faith. If churches give preferential treatment to their members on the grounds of wealth, education, ethnicity, political connections or social influence (whether by assigning seats, granting access to leadership, giving more pastoral attention, or allocating resources) they are not only making a social mistake but are also distorting the nature of the God they claim to worship, corrupting the unity of the body of Christ (Gal. 3:28), and undermining their credibility as a prophetic voice opposing the kind of discrimination which they are called upon to resist in society at large (Adams, 2015; Hays, 2020). On the other hand, when the church shows impartial love and active mercy to the marginalised, it becomes, using James' own words, a visible sign of God's kingdom. The church becomes a community whose everyday actions make it clear that it is grace and not status that determines a person's worth. James' argument thus provides a clear theological basis for a discussion of social justice within the church, one which does not need external social theory to justify itself but is instead rooted in the internal reasoning of Christian confession. This foundation neither idealises poverty nor stigmatises wealth. It condemns the abuse of status in deciding the worth of human beings and urges the community of faith to show, through its practical actions, the impartiality which it affirms in its creed.

7. Implications for Contemporary Ecclesial Practice

If James' argument is theological and grounded in Christology, divine character, the royal law, and eschatological judgment tempered by mercy, then its force does not end with first-century exegesis. Several implications can be derived for the contemporary church, with each traceable to a specific movement in the passage's argument. Churches should examine the practices of welcome and honour for the kind of discrimination James describes in 2:2–4. Not only the deliberate exclusion, but the often unconscious gestures by which status is silently read and rewarded in the church. Attention should be paid to where people are seated, the warmth with which they are greeted, and whether the presence of one person draws attention away from the leaders and whether that of another does not. Since James treats this pattern as a recurring disposition rather than an isolated lapse (2:1), addressing it requires ongoing self-examination rather than a single corrective gesture. The theological argument of 2:5–7 that God has chosen the poor as "heirs of the kingdom" implies that the marginalised should be regarded as active participants in the church's life and mission, not merely as objects of charity. Structures of leadership, ministry, and decision-making should be examined for whether they give the economically disadvantaged a genuine voice, consistent with James' refusal to treat social utility as a measure of a person's worth before God. The royal law cited in 2:8–11 goes beyond simply requiring interpersonal courtesy and applies to institutional practices as well. The fact that showing favouritism is regarded as a breach of the law that applies to the entire community means that decisions about the appointment of leaders, the administration of church discipline, and the distribution of resources must all be judged by the same standard of showing impartial love for

one's neighbour. The eschatological climax in 2:12–13 presents mercy not only as a personal virtue but also as something that should be evident within the Christian community. It has to be a flexible and compassionate reaction to financial difficulties. Pastoral care should not depend on a member's level of social contribution, and disciplinary measures must be carried out consistently, no matter a person's position in the congregation. The community to which mercy has been given, James suggests, should be judged by the extent to which it extends that mercy in a structural way. The church's ability to act as a prophetic voice opposing favouritism, nepotism, and exploitation in society as a whole rests on the honesty of its own internal practices since James bases ecclesial ethics on the nature of God rather than on social customs. If a church is unwilling to deal with favouritism within its own structure, then it is in a weak position to fight favouritism outside its own boundaries. On the other hand, a Christian community that clearly shows impartial love provides a public testimony that its declaration of Christ is not just in name only but is actually put into practice. None of these implications requires the church to romanticise poverty or treat wealth as inherently suspect. James does not condemn the possession of resources but their use to determine human worth. What the passage requires is a sustained institutional willingness to question its activities on the basis of God's word.

8. Conclusion

The article has argued that in James 2:1–13 there is a consistent and theologically coherent argument against showing favouritism, starting with a prohibition based on Christology (2:1), followed by a specific example of discriminatory behaviour (2:2–4), and then offering cumulative grounds for this prohibition based on the nature of God (2:5–7), the unity of the royal law (2:8–11), and the certainty of the eschatological judgment qualified by mercy (2:12–13). According to this interpretation, the prohibition of προσωπολημψία is not merely a minor remark about interpersonal politeness but a theological challenge to social discrimination within the Christian community. It is a challenge which holds the church responsible for reflecting, in its normal practices of welcoming, showing honour, granting access, and the impartiality of the God it professes. The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the coherence of James' argument as a unified theological structure rather than a set of loosely related exhortations, and in showing that the passage grounds social ethics in Christology and theology rather than in social convention alone. This offers churches a biblical and theological framework for evaluating practices of favouritism within their own structures. It gives a basis for leadership selection, resource allocation, pastoral care, and the welcome extended to strangers. The study is limited to a close literary and theological reading of the passage itself and does not carry out any empirical examination of favouritism in specific ecclesial settings. Further research might productively trace the reception history of James 2:1–13 across different denominational structures. Such work would extend, without displacing, the central conviction this article has sought to establish, that in James' argument, how the church treats the poor is not incidental to its faith but is among the clearest tests of whether that faith is genuine.

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