LESS THAN AND GREATER THAN

It’s interesting how the so-called not-so-bad sins rank worse in the Word of God than they often do in humanity’s view. The serpent of old used a lie to entice Eve into the first sin in history. The devil was kicked out of heaven for being prideful and refusing to let go of his faulty view of himself. Showing favoritism and partiality denies the inestimable value Jesus has placed on every life by giving His own. It also shows a worldly mindset based on worldly standards. Put that way, it’s easier to see how it actually is quite grievous.

Instead of telling his listeners to simply “not be partial,” James gives a clear example of how it can look: When people come over to your house, and you give preferential treatment to someone who appears to be rich, and then treat someone who looks poor in a negative way, you’re showing partiality (James 2:2–4). Furthermore, you’re holding “the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . with partiality” (v. 1). This is not just a social issue. It’s a spiritual one.

Though James’s focus is on economic comparisons, this principle extends to all comparisons. Giving preferential treatment to those perceived as prettier, smarter, taller, shorter, thinner, bigger, more articulate, or any other comparison that society brings to one’s attention is just as damaging and just as contrary to the faith of Jesus. It uses a worldly paradigm of categorizing people as less than or greater than one another.

In the kingdom of God, all are bought by the same unfathomable price of the blood of Christ. No amount of money, looks, communication, or status can alter a human’s value one bit—neither to increase or lessen it.
Write out James 2:1–13 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out James 2:8–10. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
DANGEROUS FAVORITISM

In James’s example of the assembly gone wrong, he zeroes in on all that a human has to go on in judging someone else: appearances. Gold rings, fine apparel, and filthy clothes are used to determine how someone should be treated. Can't this be terribly inaccurate? Not all who are rich wear nice clothes (hello, Mark Zuckerberg), and not all who are poor wear filthy clothes. One of the key reasons to not judge others is not just that it isn't nice, but that humans make awful judges. Unlike God, who sees the heart and can judge clearly (1 Sam. 16:7), humanity is only able to see the surface level, which does not provide enough information to make a fair, let alone righteous, judgment.

James says that showing favoritism is equivalent to “becom[ing] judges with evil thoughts,” and it denies the reality of how God deals with the poor, namely, for them to be “rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him” (James 2:4, 5).

He then pivots and asks two pointed questions about the rich: “Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?” (vv. 6, 7). Said another way, Why are you trying to impress people who don’t even care about you? Why are you seeking to elevate those who oppress you? Why are you honoring those who dishonor the God who is supposed to be most important to you? Even from a selfish perspective, this does not make any sense. Why worship those who degrade? Why put people on a pedestal who are not worth emulating? By oppressing their brothers and sisters and blaspheming God, the so-called successful give evidence of a bankrupt soul, a success that is nominal alone.

This skewed perspective invariably affects the spirituality of those who hold it. Caught up in the standards and paradigms of the world, it’s possible to show partiality to those who are successful in the world and yet sideline the God who created them. God is treated as “poor,” passed over for His lack of worldly popularity and acceptance. This does not need to be so.

Humanity is not categorized by the haves and the have-nots, sifted for possessions or talents that determine their value. This perspective is a sin that brings countless delusions in its wake. Seeing fellow humans and God as they really are, with the eyes of faith, helps preserve God on the throne of one’s heart, as well as an accurate view of all humans—one of compassion and truth.
SELECTIVE OBEDIENCE

James reminds the believers that the royal law can be summed up and followed as, “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ ” and it is enough (James 2:8). Partiality is a definite deviation from this strict adherence and, if indulged, will lead the transgressor to be convicted of sin (v. 9). He then seems to change topics completely, mentioning murder and adultery, and focusing on complete obedience to the law.

Without context, verse 10 can sound as though any slip-ups in the Christian life disqualify the individual for all communion with God, because messing up “one point” makes them “guilty of all.” However, knowing the stories of Abraham (lied), David (murdered, committed adultery), Solomon (how many women?), Peter (denied Jesus), and Paul (killed Christians), that conclusion can’t be right. Looking closer at the following verses, the meaning becomes apparent: “For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law” (v. 11). Here, James is warning against a selective obedience, one that says, “Well, I struggle with partiality, but I don’t lust over anyone, so I’m not that bad off.” In the same way that lack of adultery does not excuse murder, lack of some other sin does not excuse partiality. Allowing God to change us in nine out of ten ways is equivalent to not allowing Him to change us at all. We are either wholly His or not at all.

The “law of liberty,” James continues, is the standard that humanity will be judged by (v. 12). It is “of liberty” because it is not burdensome; it is freedom that Jesus secured by His death and resurrection. The freedom of Jesus should be taken as an opportunity to love others, not to judge them or treat them unfairly (Gal. 5:13).

James concludes with his own version of Matthew 7:2, “For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy” (James 2:13). On the mountainside, Jesus said that the merciful receive mercy, and those who judge will be judged with their same standard (Matthew 5:7; 7:2). Of even more relevance, the author of Proverbs warned that those who ignore the poor will themselves be ignored in their time of need (Prov. 21:13). God has called us to be an integral part to the cycle of blessing. He originates all blessings by giving first and without reservation, and He expects His children to give of the blessings He has shared with them.

While free from the bondage of the law, God calls His people to use the law of liberty as an opportunity to reveal His character: that of inestimable love.

Read more at www.inversebible.org/jam04-4

What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Matthew 18:1–5
Luke 18:9–14
Galatians 5
Matthew 6:26
James 4:17

What other verses come to mind in connection with James 2:1–13?
UNDESIRABLE

In one of the most famous prophecies of the Messiah, Isaiah painted a picture of One who was to come:

“For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant,  
And as a root out of dry ground.  
He has no form or comeliness;  
And when we see Him  
There is no beauty that we should desire Him.  
He is despised and rejected by men,  
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.  
And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him;  
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (Isaiah 53:2, 3).

Though no explicit physical features are mentioned, the evaluation is: without beauty and comeliness, nothing outward to draw exaltation or attraction. Instead, He is despised and without esteem, rejected and ignored.

By human standards, there is nothing in Jesus for humanity to desire Him. He walked this earth with the lowly fishermen and hated tax collectors, the loose women and the fringes of society. When He gave up His life on the cross, He died the most humiliating death possible, seeming to have failed at every turn: no friends, no power, no money. He was not rich, and His power was never demonstrated in a way that met the standards of worldly greatness.

Jesus didn’t display favoritism. He accepted the fellowship of rich and poor alike, whoever would have Him with sincerity of heart. He instructed both in the kingdom of God, even revealing coveted truths to an ostracized woman while at the well and to a convicted religious leader by night. He didn’t love people more if they did more ministry or religious activities. He seemed to completely ignore the comparative hierarchy He saw around Him, and instead insisted on living the kingdom of God on earth.

The world may see some people as undesirables. But Jesus came as someone apparently undesirable in order to demonstrate the intense desire He has for all to be redeemed by His grace. Whether someone is rich or poor, talented or less so, does not matter. What matters is one’s view of the rich or the poor. Neither one validates or invalidates, elevates or pushes down. All are equal recipients of His unrelenting love and grace in the kingdom of God. He invites His followers to continue living out this reality.
A DIFFERENT SYSTEM OF VALUE

The apostle Jude says: “Of some have compassion, making a difference.” This difference is not to be exercised in a spirit of favoritism. No countenance should be given to a spirit that implies: “If you favor me, I will favor you.” This is unsanctified, worldly policy, which displeases God. It is paying favors and admiration for the sake of gain. It is showing a partiality for certain ones, expecting to secure advantages through them. It is seeking their good will by indulgence, that we may be held in greater estimation than others fully as worthy as ourselves. It is a hard thing to see one’s own errors, but everyone should realize how cruel is the spirit of envy, rivalry, distrust, faultfinding, and dissension. (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 4, 221, 222.)

I have been looking over some of my writings, and I find that warnings on this point were given years ago. It is plainly stated that the buildings in Battle Creek should not be enlarged, that building should not be added to building to increase facilities there. We were instructed not to accumulate interests in that one place, but to enlarge our sphere of labor. There was danger that Battle Creek would become as Jerusalem of old—a powerful center. If we do not heed these warnings, the evils that ruined Jerusalem will come upon us. Pride, self-exaltation, neglect of the poor, and partiality to the wealthy—these were the sins of Jerusalem. Today when large interests are built up in one place, the workers are tempted to become lifted up in selfishness and pride. When they yield to this temptation they are not laborers together with God. Instead of seeking to increase our responsibilities in Battle Creek, we should bravely and willingly divide the responsibilities already there, distributing them to many places. (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 8, 133.)

We can understand the value of the human soul only as we realize the greatness of the sacrifice made for its redemption. The word of God declares that we are not our own, that we are bought with a price. It is at an immense cost that we have been placed upon vantage ground, where we can find liberty from the bondage of sin wrought by the fall in Eden. Adam's sin plunged the race into hopeless misery; but by the sacrifice of the Son of God, a second probation was granted to man. In the plan of redemption a way of escape is provided for all who will avail themselves of it. God knew that it was impossible for man to overcome in his own strength, and he has provided help for him. How thankful we should be that a way is open for us, by which we can have access to the Father; that the gates are left ajar, so that beams of light from the glory within may shine upon those who will receive them! (Ellen G. White, Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene, 15, 16.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What are some ways that you’ve seen people categorized as greater than or less than? What truths do these categorizations miss?

How can we overcome ingrained stereotypes or ways of treating people with partiality?

Share a time that you were treated unfairly and/or less than. What did you learn from the experience?

How can we learn to distrust our judgments of other people and trust God’s view and justice instead?

What are a few examples of things God has asked you to do that are relatively easy for you? What are a few that are harder?

How can we know if we’re “selectively obeying” Christ?

How was Jesus’ ministry counter cultural to today’s culture and ways of doing ministry?