

James On What Your Social Instincts Reveal

Think about the last time you walked into a room full of people you did not know well. Maybe it was a party, a work function, a community event. And without really deciding to, you started reading the room. Who looked approachable. Who looked important. Who looked like they might have something to offer. Who you would probably not bother with.

Most of us do this. And most of us do not notice that we are doing it.

Now here is the question James wants to put to us. Not what do you say you believe. But what do those instincts, those split-second decisions, reveal about what you actually trust?

That is the question we are going to sit with.

There is a difference between what we would say we believe if someone asked, and what our behaviour reveals we believe when no one is asking. Most of us, if pressed, would say that every person has dignity. That God does not play favourites. That status and wealth do not determine a person's worth. We mean it when we say it.

But then we walk into a room. And something else comes out. James is not interested in what we would say. He is interested in the second thing. The instinct. The habit. The pattern of attention and warmth and regard that we distribute to people before we have had a chance to think about it. Because that pattern, he argues, tells us something true about what we are actually trusting. We are all somewhere in this. I am somewhere in this. So let's grapple with it together.

James has been building toward this since the opening of his letter. In chapter one, he pauses on the subject of wealth and poverty, and he makes a move that is easy to read past. He says this, in James 1:9–11:

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.” James 1:9–11.

James is describing two postures. The person of low standing is told to boast, to hold their head up, because their standing before God is not what the world sees. And the rich person is told to

boast in their humiliation. Not because poverty is a virtue in itself, but because the things wealth represents, security, status, permanence, are fading like a field flower in summer heat. The image comes from Isaiah, and it is not decorative. It is a forecast. James is telling his readers that God's accounting runs in a different direction to the world's. What looks like advantage may not be. What looks like disadvantage may be something else entirely.

So before we even get to chapter two, James has already planted a question in the ground: what are you actually trusting? What do you actually believe has lasting weight? Then comes chapter two. And James gives us a scene.

“My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and 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,’ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” James 2:1–4.

Two people walk in. One has a gold ring and fine clothes. One has shabby clothes. The community responds instantly. The wealthy man is ushered to the good seat. The poor man is told to stand, or to sit on the floor.

Now James could have framed this as a lapse in hospitality. He does not. He frames it as a contradiction. Look at how he opens verse one: do not hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.

One New Testament scholar, Scot McKnight, puts it this way: the person in this scene is doing two things simultaneously, holding faith and partiality in the same hand. And James, he says, considers that a form of double-mindedness. Two things that cannot occupy the same hand are being held there anyway.

James is not just saying, “be nicer to the poor man”. He is saying, what you just did in that room is a contradiction of what you say you believe. Those two things cannot both be true of you at the same time.

The word “glory” matters here. Jesus is the Lord of glory. And his glory came through poverty, through humiliation, through death, and only then through exaltation. The community that claims faith

in that story, and then instinctively ushers the wealthy man to the seat of honour, is enacting a different story. A different picture of what actually has weight in the world.

The behaviour is a confession. It just confesses something other than what they say they believe.

And then James makes it more pointed still. In verse five he asks: has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom? God has chosen these people. And you have dishonoured them. The very people God is for, you are moving to the floor.

So let's ask the question plainly. Because James is asking it plainly.

What does the way we treat people tell us about what we actually believe?

If we believe that God has chosen the poor, that glory came through humiliation, that what a person holds before God is not the same as what they hold before the world, then that working picture of reality should show up somewhere in how we respond to the people in front of us. In who we notice. In who we move toward. In who gets our warmth and our time and our regard.

And if it is not showing up there, then what we say we believe and what we actually trust are two different things. This is not a small problem for James. It is not a manners issue or a diversity issue. It is a question of integrity. Of whether the inner and the outer are moving in the same direction.

It is the same thing he diagnosed in the double-minded person of chapter one, the one who asks God for wisdom but does not really trust the answer. It is the same thing he will name later in the person who hears the word and does not do it. Always the same gap. Always the same divided heart.

And James wants to know where our trust is actually placed.

Not where we say it is. Where it actually is.

Before we get to the application, James gives us one more piece in verses eight to thirteen. He quotes Leviticus 19:18: love your neighbour as yourself. He calls it the royal law. Not one rule among many. In the tradition James is drawing on, this was understood as the summary of the whole second table of the law. To show partiality is not to break one small rule. It is to break the shape of the whole thing.

And yet he closes the section not on judgment but on this: "Mercy triumphs over judgment." James 2:13. That is both a

warning and an invitation. The same God who holds the accounting is a God of mercy. And we are called to be people of mercy. That can look different for each of us.

For some, it is the automatic attention that flows toward impressive people. The way certain voices carry more weight in a conversation. The way some people get followed up with and others get left. We are not being cruel. We are just distributing our regard according to a set of instincts that have never been examined. And James is asking us to examine them.

For others, the issue is closer to what wealth has become in our inner lives. Not just whether we have money, but what role it plays in making us feel secure, significant, or settled. James is not condemning wealth as such. Abraham was wealthy. Job was wealthy. James holds them up as heroes. But he is intensely alert to what wealth does to our sight. When our sense of security is quietly anchored in what we have, it changes how we see people. Those who have more start to look like they matter more. Those who have less start to disappear.

And for others still, the gap is between compassion that stays in the feeling and mercy that actually moves. James will name this directly later in the chapter: if a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and you say, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? The warmth is real. The intention is real. But nothing moves. And James says that is not the love he is describing.

So let me ask you something direct.

Is there a person in your life, someone you know or encounter regularly, who receives less of your attention, your warmth, your regard, because of where they sit in the social picture? Not because you dislike them. Just because, if you are honest, you do not give them the same quality of presence you give to others.

What does that tell you about what you are actually trusting? And then the other side of the question. Because James does not close on judgment. He closes on mercy triumphing over judgment.

The same God who has chosen the poor, who sees the flower fading while we are still impressed by the gold ring, is a God of mercy. And we are called to be people of mercy.

So let's not leave this in the abstract.

Think of that person. The one who comes to mind when you sit with the question. Go toward them. Give them the quality of attention you give to people you find impressive. Not as an exercise. As an act of trust. As a way of saying, with your behaviour rather than your words, that you believe what you say

you believe.

James is not asking for a performance. He is asking for integrity.
For the inside and the outside to begin moving toward each other.
For what we trust and how we live to start telling the same story.

I hope and pray that is something we are all willing to grapple with.