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The Relevance of James' Attitude towards Partiality for Nigeria

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Abstract

Partiality, which is sometimes referred to as favouritism, is the bedrock of all discriminations. James makes clear that partiality is sin against the Almighty God. Existing studies on partiality have focused more on the justification of its practices and meanings at the neglect of its negative influence on obedience to the sovereign God and His Law. This study, therefore, examines James' attitude towards partiality with a view to establishing its relevance to the Nigerian society. Using Martin Dibelius' approach to James, the study revealed that partiality usurps God's sovereignty, aligns its practitioners with God's enemies, and violates God's law of love. The paper condemns acts of partiality as God does not show partiality and recommends that all Nigerians should display the same attitude as it is enshrined in James 2:1-12.

Introduction

James' concept of partiality is the hallmark of his theology of practical Christianity and 'pure and faultless religion'. It abolishes discriminations at all levels. *Partiality* implies an inclination to favour a person or thing because of strong fondness or attachment. Literally, it means "to take the face", that is first to look at someone's appearance (status, money, position, tribe, etc.) and then to decide things. In other words, it means to be willing to take a bribe. Treating people with partiality may spring from predilection, or from prejudice, or from bias. *Predilection* implies a preconceived liking formed as a result of one's background, temperament, etc., that inclines one to a particular preference. *Prejudice* implies a preconceived and unreasonable judgment or opinion, usually an unfavourable one, marked by suspicion, fear, intolerance, or hatred. *Bias* implies a mental leaning in favour of or against someone or something without passing judgment on the correctness or incorrectness of the preference.¹ Partiality is the characteristic sin of a corrupt judge, who does not pronounce a sentence according to evidence alone, but who allows the influence of money to pervert justice. James makes clear that integrity of faith places Christians in opposition to the roles that money, across the centuries, has played in human society. God is impartial, and so should we be.

In Nigeria, partiality sometimes arises because of differences in economic levels, ethnic groups, religious preferences, political views, educational backgrounds, and personal opinions, to name but a few causes. It manifests in all spheres of the Nigerian society such as work places, families and even in religion. Some rich do not only oppose Christians; they also typically speak against Christ. This was true in James' world as it is in ours today. It is inconsistent with the Christian doctrine to give special honour to those who despise the Lord whom believers love and serve. But, why court the favour of those who oppose God? To what degree is the teaching of James on partiality eroding the social distinctions between great and small, rich and poor, male and female, Hausa or Ibo and Yoruba in Nigeria? At the moment when Boko Haram, an Islamist sect, has gained press attention in Nigeria and electioneering campaigns are in progress. James' attitude towards partiality draws significant attention.

Martin Dibelius' approach posits that James represents a practical manual of Christian instruction.² Using this as framework, this paper aims at examining James' attitude towards partiality and its relevance to Nigerian society.

The Context

James writes a practical treatise for Jewish Christians, not only in Jerusalem, but throughout the Roman Empire. These were likely the believers from the early Jerusalem church who, after Stephen's execution, were scattered through Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1) and as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:19). Also, since the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, many Jews were scattered throughout different nations (Acts 2:5-11; James 1:1). This naturally leads one to think of Jews (Acts 26:6-7) living outside the land of Palestine. He writes about AD 60³ just before the first severe persecution breaks upon the Church, but at a time when behaviour within the community and its attitude toward those outside had already become a problem. Many of these Jewish Christians were poor and oppressed. Being Jews, they would often be rejected by the Gentiles. As Jewish Christians, they would also be rejected by many of their own countrymen.⁴ Also, James indicates that most of them were being defrauded and oppressed by overbearing Jews and by the rich respectively (James 2:6-7). Evidently the gospel was spreading among rich as well as poor people, or else it would be unrealistic for James to suppose a rich person would be present at either the worship or the judicial assembly. Jewish Christians were encountering the moral issue of discrimination, and they were struggling with the relationship between rich and poor.

However, the New Testament church was radically counter-cultural. It consisted of Jews and Greeks, slaves and slave-owners, worshipping together. Instead of being a revolutionary movement that threatened the cultural status quo, the early church proclaimed the gospel and exhorted both slaves and slave-owners to regard each other as brothers in God's family. God shows no partiality, impartiality is known by having the fear of God and doing what is right and acceptable to Him. Partiality contradicts faith in Christ Jesus. This is 'the true position' of the Christian condition.⁵

The periscope James 2:1-12 reveals the first part of the central teaching of James and it discusses partiality in the assembly. The second part, James 2:14-26 addresses the interrelationship of faith and works while James 2:13 stands between those sections and provides a link between them as well as giving a clue to the point he wishes to make in the chapter.

How then can vv. 1-12 be understood in the text, especially as our subject for discussion lies within this unit? A number of proposals have been advanced. In a short essay as this, we will deal with two areas of the context of James that are especially significant for understanding the text. First James reflects something of the concerns of the Jerusalem Church in its primitive stage: still very Jewish in character and not yet aware of its universal mission. Then James reflects a close acquaintance with the Old Testament Scriptures, especially in its Greek translation. And finally he reflects a close awareness of the teaching of Jesus, especially that which finds expression in the Gospel of Matthew.⁶

As to the context of the early church one can easily imagine the situation pictured in the early chapters of Acts as a background of James' teaching. Acts 2:45, for example, gives us a glimpse of the spontaneous love for one another that characterised that first group of believers. The initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit created a natural openness and sharing and it is surely with these early days in mind that James wrote his letter. He is painfully aware that the first flush of loving enthusiasm had not lasted. The unity had begun to give way to a partiality that judged people by human and external standards. As we noted above James fears that believers might lose that essential mark that set them out as God's own people: that loving concern for one another that reflected their faith in God.

The second context of the book of James is the teaching of Jesus. Perhaps because James was the brother of Jesus⁷ and benefited from close association, he makes significant use of the

Lord’s Sermon on the Mount. Because of James’ emphasis on judging, the obvious place to begin looking is Matthew 7:1, where followers of Christ are commanded not to judge. Except for James’ omission of Jesus’ emphasis on asking and believing (which James included in 1:5-8 and which does not really fit his primary purpose in this section), the parallels between the two passages are extensive.

Table: The Parallels between Matthew 7:1-14 and James 2:1-13

Matthew 7:1-14	James 2:1-13
1-2 Prohibition against judging	1 Prohibition against judgmental partiality
3-5 Illustration of removing one's own faults so that one can help remove others' faults	2-4 Illustration of removing one's own partiality so that one can judge or instruct others
6 Warning not to despise what is sacred in favour of dogs or pigs that will harm you	5-7 Warning not to despise brothers who are rich in faith in favour of others who harm you
7-11 Encouragement to ask and to believe	
12 Summary of the law as doing to others what you would want for yourself	8-11 Summary of the law as loving others as yourself
13-14 Summary admonition to follow the narrow way that leads to life.	12-13 Summary admonition to follow the law that gives freedom

Verses 1-12 introduce the problem of partiality. “Partiality” as practised by Christians is a manifestation of inconsistent love for other people. We do not love some people as we should when we show partiality. Throughout this epistle, James dealt with inconsistencies in Christian behaviour. We saw this in chapter 1, in which inconsistency involved regarding trial as good gifts from God sometimes and as bad gifts at other times. In chapter 3, the inconsistency is with our speech. In chapter 2, it is inconsistent treatment of other people. Consistency is very important in both theology and practice.⁸

Luke’s account of the parable of the great supper⁹ is also a significant teaching of Jesus in the context of James. In this parable, J. A. Sanders believes, Jesus is offering a prophetic critique of what the religious leaders of his day had done with the Deuteronomic doctrine of election.¹⁰ As their fathers before them they had come to see their place in God’s call as a special privilege which God would not revoke. They, in the terms of the parable, were sure who would be invited to the messianic banquet and who would be excluded. They even believed they knew the guest list and the seating arrangement! In other words, they had completely lost sight of the fact that God’s call, the call they were to echo was itself a ‘showing of mercy’ to the needy and was intended to include as many as had need (‘Go out to

the highways and hedges' Luke 14:23). It was this idea which underlayed much of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and which James reiterates in his book, especially in the second chapter. Righteousness is not a matter of calculating observance of laws, but it is a spontaneous overflowing expression of love and showing impartiality.¹¹ In James' language partiality contradicts faith in Christ Jesus.¹²

The Background of James' Teaching

James' teaching on partiality had roots in both the logia of Jesus and the Jewish world. The logia of Jesus are the teachings that make up what we call the Sermon on the Mount. Christ's teaching recorded in Matthew 7 and Luke 6 is the background for James 2. Its setting has been further explained by the discoveries at Qumran and their revelations about Jewish community life at the time of Jesus. Parallels between James and Qumran are so interesting that T. H. Gaster concluded: "the Dead Sea Scrolls indeed open a window upon the little community of Jewish Christians clustered around James in Jerusalem. These men may have been originally the urban brethren of the 'hardier' souls that betook themselves to Qumran."¹³ This explains the frequency with which James repeats the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Any Jewish Christian would be supremely interested in the ethical teaching of the Christian faith.

James and the letter of the Council of Jerusalem to the Gentile Churches have a curious resemblance in that Acts 15:17 has a phrase in the letter of the Council of Jerusalem in which it speaks of the Gentiles *who are called by my name*. This phrase does not in any other place occur in the New Testament except in James 2:7 where it is translated as *the name by which you are called*. Although the Revised Standard Version translation differs slightly, the Greek is exactly the same.¹⁴

The text is a clue that in the illustration of James 2:2-4 he is thinking of the rich and poor individuals as ones who come needing to be instructed in some way. James's illustration fits the pattern in Matthew 7 and Luke 6 if the partiality is seen as disqualifying the Christian community from being able to instruct the ones who come into the assembly.

The Jewish world also had its tradition of teaching on partiality. The Jewish rule of law states that since God is just and opposes the persons who use the law to further oppress the marginal members of society, he expects his people to follow his example faithfully. According to the Deuteronomist Code, the God of heavens and earth, who loved Israel's

forefathers and loved the nation dearly, shows no partiality and accepts no bribes and demands total loyalty, “You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns” (Deut 24:14).¹⁵ This Jewish teaching was frequently a string of moral truths and exhortations coming one after another. This is exactly what James’ teaching is. It is difficult, if not impossible, to extract from it a continuous and coherent plan. Its sections follow each other with certain disconnectedness. Goodspeed writes: “The work has been compared to a chain, each link related to the one before and the one after it. Others have compared its contents to beads on a string.... And, perhaps, James is not so much a chain of thoughts or beads as it is a handful of pearls dropped one by one into the hearer’s mind.”¹⁶

James’ teaching, whether looked at from the logia of Jesus or from the Jewish point of view, is a good example of an ancient teaching on partiality. His focus is on the sin of showing partiality to the rich and despising the poor, but his words apply to all types of prejudice, whether based on economic status, race, social levels, or age groups. To favour some people and to disregard others based on outward factors is a terrible sin that plagued the early church in James’ time. It has plagued the church and the society in every generation, because it stems from pride, which is endemic to our fallen hearts. It ignores the glory of the New Testament church, “in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). Partiality obliterates the glory of God and His salvation. In Christ this imbalance was to be restored. This is why James’ teaching has stood the test of time, and still has relevance for us in Nigeria today where societal disparity manifests itself in all shades and colours. It is with these conditions in mind that James speaks on partiality.

Exegesis of James 2:1-12

Verses 1-5

In these verses James shows two ways that partiality usurps God’s sovereignty:

First, *Partiality puts man as judge in the place of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ (2:1-4).*

James opens with the command, *μη̄ εν̄ προσωπολημψιαις̄ ε̄χετε την̄ πιστιν̄ τοῡ Κυριοῡ η̄μων̄ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῡ της̄ δόξης.* “show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” The word *προσωπολημψιαις̄* is in the dative plural case of the noun *προσωπολημψια*; either *προσωπολημψια* or *προσωπολημπτης* denotes one

who shows partiality or judges according to appearances or has human respect. It is used of prejudicial partiality for the greater at the expense of the lesser.¹⁷ Here discrimination rests on outward and external standards. The word *προσωποληψια*, is found only here in the New Testament but reflects the semiticism, *πρόσωπον λαμβανω*, and recalls Deuteronomy 10:17 (LXX) where God *οὐ θαυμάζει πρόσωπον*. One cannot impress God with his appearance, and God's people are to be similarly unwavering (interestingly the word for 'wavering doubt' in James 1:6 and 'distinction' in James 2:4 are the same in Greek). In Job 34:19 it is this characteristic of God, His not showing partiality, which qualifies Him to govern. Partiality is not a glorious characteristic, and it is therefore inconsistent for a Christian who worships the glorious Lord Jesus Christ to practise it (cf. Matt. 22:16 Acts 10:34). All earthly distinctions disappear in the presence of our glorious Lord. By focusing our attention on Jesus Christ in His glory, James addresses the problem of partiality in two ways. First, he gets us to see how petty our distinctions between the rich and poor (or any other distinctions) really are. Even the most powerfully rich men on earth are nothing compared to the glory of Jesus Christ, the King of kings. For example, King Nebuchadnezzar thought that he was great, but God humbled him so that he ate grass like a beast of the field. When he came to his senses, he acknowledged that God alone is great (Daniel 4:34-37). When men are exalted on account of their wealth or power or status, glory is robbed from Jesus Christ, who in His sovereignty gives men everything that they are and have (1 Cor. 4:7). Rather than exalting the rich, men should exalt the supreme glory of Christ alone. Focusing on the glory of Christ puts us all in our proper place before Him. Second, when James ascribes glory to the Lord Jesus Christ, it probably points to His coming in power and glory to judge the earth (Matt. 26:64).¹⁸ To judge a man based on his outward appearance is to usurp the place of Jesus Christ in His glory as judge of all the earth. It must not be mistaken to conclude that James is saying that the rich are categorically bad and the poor are categorically good. Some rich men are very godly and some poor men are very evil. However, James' point is that any judgments based on outward factors alone are wrong judgments, because they do not discern the heart. Only God can judge the heart, and so it is wrong to usurp His place as judge.

Second, *Partiality puts man as sovereign in the place of God who chooses* (2:5). First, the New Testament writers¹⁹ consistently assume that God chooses those who are saved apart from any merit or qualifications on the part of those chosen. Salvation is not offered to

anyone on the basis of anything that God sees or foresees in that person. He does not choose the rich man to get his money for the kingdom. God does not choose the poor man because of his poverty. God does not choose those whom He foresees will one day trust in Him, because that would make salvation depend on something that originates in fallen man. God's choice is completely based on His grace and purpose (Rom. 9:11-16). Since God has chosen the poor of this world to be the recipients of His blessings it is inconsistent for Christians to withhold blessings from them (cf. Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20). James is not teaching that God chooses all poor men for salvation and passes over all rich men. Rather, it was obvious in the early church that many more poor people had trusted in Christ for salvation, as compared to the rich. William Barclay says, ". . . in its early days the Church was predominantly poor and humble; and therefore if a rich man was converted, and did come to the Christian fellowship, there must have been a very real temptation to make a fuss of him, and to treat him as a special trophy for Christ."²⁰ There were some rich people (Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, Barnabas, Philemon, etc.), but the numbers were slanted toward the poor. That's why Paul says to the Corinthians, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God" (1 Cor. 1:26-29). By choosing those whom the world rejects and despises, God magnifies the riches of His grace. When James says that God chooses the poor "to be rich in faith," he means they have spiritual riches in Christ through God's sovereign, gracious choice, which brought them to faith in Him (as Paul argues in Eph. 1:3-14). At the moment of salvation, they come under the reign of Christ in their hearts (Col. 1:13-14), but there remains in the future the fullness of that kingdom and its blessings, when Jesus returns in power and glory (Matt. 25:31-34).

In contemporary Nigeria, the practice of partiality among the royal, political and religious godfathers have become the order of the day. It is arrogantly practised with all pleasure and impunity. People that are supposed to checkmate this malady, which is eating deep into the development and progress of Nigeria, practise favouritism at all levels of the social structure and governance. Their acts of partiality make them demand the glory which belongs to God from their godsons after assisting them to such offices. These acts make them become their dictators. They ignore the fact that God allows their godsons in the offices they occupy. For

instance, the Lagos State governor, Babatunde Fashola, got a rude shock from his principal and predecessor, Bola Tinubu who says to him “If there’s no partiality, you cannot be governor yourself.” Tinubu added that he had not regretted choosing Fashola as governor.²¹ The question that may come to mind is whether Nigerian governors selected or elected? This selection and favouritism approach to the appointment of offices has made Nigerian youths resort to militancy, which involves kidnapping, destruction of oil pipelines and bombing of oil fields in order to vent their anger on government and those in governance. Partiality in governance has led to youths’ claim that they are fighting for their own survival, gainful employment, the dehumanisation of our own people, denial of fundamental human rights (regular power supply, good roads, etc.) and the lack of effective education for them. Also, there is denial of justice in Nigerian courts at all levels. The agitation by the Nigerian youths is their own way of expressing their bottled up anger at the social paradox whereby they are suffering from poverty in the midst of plenty. So James’ argument is that partiality toward the rich and against the poor (or, partiality based on any external factors) is wrong because it puts this perpetrators in the place of judge like God. By showing partiality, we usurp the role that belongs to God alone, who makes sovereign choices.

Verses 6-7

James 2:6-7 implies that Partiality aligns its practitioners with God’s enemies. James states that by making distinctions based on outward factors, the church has dishonoured the poor man. However, James is not teaching that the church should ignore or despise the rich because of their riches. That would be reverse discrimination! The church should show God’s love and grace to all, whether rich or poor. Rather, he is saying that the rich should not be given preferential treatment, to the detriment of the poor, in an attempt to court their money or influence. James makes two points:

First, God’s enemies use their strength to oppress the poor, whereas God is concerned for justice for the poor (2:6). He asks a question that required an affirmative answer, *οὐχ οἱ πλούσιοι καταδυναστεύουσιν ὑμᾶς καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔλκουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς κριτήρια;* “Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court?” James writes with a sharp contrast between *πλούσιοι* “the rich” and *πτωχοὶ* “the poor”. James would surely remember Jesus’ warning of how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom; it astonished the disciples when he said it (Mt 19:23-25). Why would wealth have this effect? Because of greed and selfishness, in every culture and age, the wealthy tend to take advantage of those

who are helplessly poor. Even though the rich man does not need the money, he forecloses on the poor person's property to collect on a debt, or he charges exorbitant interest that the poor person could never hope to repay. Or, he pays pitiful wages that hardly allow a man to feed his family, while the rich man just gets richer. Also, as William Barclay explains, "If a creditor met a debtor on the street, he could seize him by the neck of his robe, nearly throttling him, and literally drag him to the law-courts."²² That's what James is describing here. It is not wealth that James is condemning, but a lack of compassion and understanding on the part of the wealthy towards the poor. The Old Testament repeatedly emphasises that God is concerned for the rights of the poor. The wicked Queen Jezebel hired false witnesses to accuse Naboth and execute him. Then she seized his property, just because her pouting husband wanted it for a vegetable garden. Because of this, God pronounced severe judgment on Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 21:1-24). The law stipulated that Israel appoint those who judge the people righteously (Deut. 16:18, 20; Ps. 82:3-4). Merchants were commanded to have full, just weights and measures (Deut. 25:15). Bribery was condemned (1 Sam. 8:3; Ps. 15:5; 26:10; Amos 5:12). The prophets often confront Israel for oppressing the poor, especially orphans and widows (Isa. 1:17; Jer. 22:15-16; Ezek. 22:7; Amos 4:1; 5:15, 24). Sodom was condemned because she "had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy" (Ezek. 16:49). In the New Testament, Paul exhorts (Col. 4:1), "Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven."

Abogunrin avers that today the poor in Nigeria suffer not only materially but socially, culturally and politically, as well as in the area of human rights and job opportunities. The rising affluence and the ostentation of the few neighbours next door make the poor to feel really miserable. African traditional and religious values have been eroded. Moreover, the social and community support of the past have gradually disappeared and this has really complicated issues and made life unbearable for the poor in Nigeria. In addition, apart from the loss of human dignity, they are increasingly oppressed and exploited by both the government and the rich. The concentration of the national wealth and power in the hands of a few Nigerians makes the poor feel marginalised and less human. Poverty appears to the poor as a deprivation of life in relation to the basic necessities for comfortable daily living. But the poor in our midst have the right to better life, to decent food and housing, to good jobs, to be educated, to good health-care and to participate in the making of decisions affecting their destiny. They live on the very margin of existence, with inadequate food,

shelter, clean water and healthy environment.²³ So James' point is that if you give preferential treatment to the rich man who oppresses the poor, you're aligning yourself with God's enemies. John Calvin compares it to honouring your executioners and injuring your own friends!²⁴

Second, *God's enemies blaspheme the name of Christ by which Christians have been called* (2:7). James' second rhetorical question is, *οὐκ αὐτοὶ βλασφημοῦσιν τὸ καλὸν ὄνομα τὸ ἐπικληθὲν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς*; "Is it not they who blaspheme that honorable name which was invoked over you?" The literal rendering, "which has been called upon you" (NASB, margin) refers to the practice of a wife taking her husband's name, or a child taking on the name of his father. Christians take the name of their Saviour, Jesus Christ. The verb *βλασφημεω* means to mock deliberately or to speak contemptuously of God. Perhaps those who were blaspheming Christ's name were unbelieving Jews (cf. Acts 13:45). Douglas Moo suggests that it could have been the Gentiles mocking the Christians' God, or the Jews criticising the Christian claims about Jesus. It may refer to unbelievers making fun of Christian morality or worship.²⁵

William Barclay²⁶ suggests that the wealthy slave owners may have insulted their Christian slaves or the slaves' new Lord and Master because of several reasons. The believing slave would have a new sense of independence, and thus no longer cringe at his master's power. He would have a new sense of honesty, and thus not go along with his master's dishonest practices. He would have a new sense of priorities, and thus insist on leaving work aside so that he could worship with his fellow believers. These and other reasons would cause these rich unbelievers to blaspheme the name of Christ and those who followed Him. So, again, James' point is that showing partiality to the rich is wrong, because you align yourself with those who despise God. He is not saying that all rich people do this, but is making generalisations.

Verses 8-12

These verses suggest that partiality violates God's law of love. Here is the flow of thought: To show partiality violates the second great commandment of God's law, to love your neighbour as yourself. To break God's law is sin and to break even one part of it is to break the whole. Since God's law is the standard by which everyone will be judged, we should live in the light of that coming judgment, especially by showing mercy to the poor. James singles

out the command from Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” This is cited six times in the synoptic gospels, and also in Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14. Jesus referred to it as the second great command, after, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). He added (Matt.22:40), “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” Just prior to the command to love our neighbour, Moses wrote (Lev. 19:15), “You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbour fairly.” So part of biblical love for one’s neighbour includes treating each person fairly and impartially.

The uniformed people in Nigeria are not also exempted from the practice of partiality. Two political parties in Nigeria, Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) in separate reactions on Thursday, July 18, 2013, accused the police of being partial in their handling of investigations into the Rivers State House of Assembly fracas.²⁷ The love for truth and unity among Nigerians is missing due to the presence of partiality in every sphere of our country. No one cares about the aftermath of this malady and disobedience to God’s commandments. We have our various cultural and political constitutions that we apply to suit our selfish and partial practices. Obedience to the law of economic power is the order of the day since the rich must get richer and the poor poorer.

Indeed, there are only *two* great commandments, not three: (1) Love God; (2) love your neighbour. Love of self is assumed as the standard by which we must love our neighbour. So the point of the second great commandment is, you care about your own needs; show the same care for the needs of others. You care about your own feelings; show the same care for the feelings of others. You care about your own desires; show the same care for the desires of others. You care about how others treat you; treat them as you would want to be treated. But, in case anyone doesn’t get it, James goes on (James 2:9) to apply the law of love specifically to partiality. To show partiality to the rich while you treat the poor with contempt, or to show partiality to a certain race, while treating those of another race as inferior, is to commit sin. James did not mean Christians should avoid honouring the rich but that we should love everyone and treat every individual as we would treat ourselves (Matt. 7:12; cf. Lev. 19:18). The word *βασιλικος* “royal” refers to law. It is royal in that it is the law of the King who heads the *βασιλικόν* “kingdom” that believers will inherit (v. 5). It is also royal in that it is

primary; it governs all other laws dealing with human relationships (Matt. 22:39; cf. Lev. 19:18).²⁸ James calls the law “the royal law.” Primarily, this means that it comes from the King, the Lord Jesus Christ. It emphasises the authority of the law. James has just mentioned (2:5) that believers are heirs of the kingdom. As such, we are first believers Nigerians, then Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba, and must live under the law of the king. So “the royal law” probably refers to “the whole law as interpreted and handed over to the church in the teaching of Jesus”.²⁹ That law is contained in Scripture: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35). The Bible is our authoritative rule of life. It reveals God’s will for how we should think and live. So we should always read and study it with a view to learning how it applies to our daily lives.

Conclusion

The type of preferential treatment James dealt with in this periscope (2:1-12) violates the royal law because it treats some as inferior and others as sources of special favour (cf. Acts 10:34). It also violates specific commands found in God’s Word that reveal God’s will in interpersonal dealings (Matt. 7:12; cf. Lev. 19:15). “The passage calls us to consistent love, not just polite ushering. People of low income are to be fully welcomed into the life of the church and secular institutions. The passage calls us to be blind to economic differences in how we render our services. The poor person is as worthy of respect and love as the person who has the means to rescue an institution from its budget crisis.”³⁰ This is true of Burdick who says, “Anyone who shows favouritism breaks the supreme law of love for his neighbour, the law that comprehends all laws governing one’s relationships with one’s fellowmen.”³¹ James’ treasured teaching on *ἀδελφοί*, brethren should guide and motivate all interpersonal relationships among Hausa or Fulani, Ibo or Yoruba, etc. People of majority or minority groups, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba must realise that matters in religion and politics that live with us today in Nigeria were man-made and could be resolved when individuals from each group or geo-political zone play their role without partiality.

The analysis of the text, context and background reveals that (i) *partiality usurps God’s sovereignty*: First, Partiality puts man as judge in the place of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ; and second, it puts man as sovereign in the place of God who chooses. (ii) *Partiality aligns its practitioners with God’s enemies*: First, God’s enemies use their strength to oppress the poor,

whereas God is concerned for justice for the poor; and second, God's enemies blaspheme the name of Christ by which Christians have been called. (iii) *Partiality violates God's law of love*. Indeed, James has fixed a spotlight on the dangerous role of wealth. Christians who seriously desire to be doers of this word will be all the more earnest in practising the law that is higher than the law of economic power. The law of economic power enables people to practise exploitation, abuse and blasphemy. James enjoins the clergy and laity, the intellectuals and unlettered, businessmen and women in Nigeria to adhere passionately to another law: the royal law, which commands impartial and unconditional love.

James 2:1-12 gives us a revolutionary teaching on social ethics. James affirms here that, on account of Christ, all men and women, in other words, all Nigerians irrespective of tribe, creed, riches, poverty and party affiliations are entitled to an equal treatment. In ecclesiology as in politics this statement calls for far reaching consequences. In 2015, Nigeria would be conducting her general elections for her leaders. This occasion should not be turned into a war among various ethnic and political groups at the inspiration of those aspiring to political office. Our political atmosphere is already polluted with acts of partiality. It is time our politicians address themselves to issues and desist from politics based on ethnic grounds and personalities with all its evils of mudslinging and character assassination reminiscent of the First Republic.³² A text like James 2:1-12 calls for a better future for Nigeria by challenging the security agencies, the cabals, the traditional and religious leaders, male and female, adults and youths, rich and poor again that the survival of democracy in this country depends on their impartial role in the forthcoming general elections.

In sum, this paper submits that unless James' attitude towards partiality is given rapt attention in all the public and private institutions and tiers of government in Nigeria, the existing injustices and lopsidedness of Nigeria's federalism will continue to anger the Nigerian society. It further recommends that acts of partiality with all its evils be condemned and enjoins all and sundry to be impartial in their role for the development and progress of democracy in Nigeria.

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