

# A NEW YEAR'S REVOLUTION

**SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN**



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James 2:1-4  
6th Message  
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December has given way to January. One folder is closed, another opens. We replace the calendar on the wall. But there is a difference between these months that goes beyond numbers, the changing 2010 to 2011. In December we fill the darkness with light—recalling the natal star, the brightness of angels, the glory of the Lord. December is a month for wonder, for delighting in good news we cannot see or touch. But in January the Christmas candles are put away. In January we are reminded that, for the most part, the world is not well lit; not a congenial place. January is the time of year when we take honest stock of ourselves and honestly face the challenge of obeying Jesus in a difficult world.

The book of James is an excellent text for New Year's resolutions. It uncovers false thinking and calls for thorough obedience. Recall James 1:22 which we considered previously. *Do not merely listen to the Word*, says James, *and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says*. Don't just listen. Do something about it!

This time of year we gather up our financial records. We like to think of ourselves as generous, but if you're going to claim anything as far as the government is concerned you have to have receipts. James is a lot like an accountant. 'Show me the receipts.' He majors in honest assessment and clear directives to make needed change.

Chapter two begins with an important 'resolution' for followers of Jesus—identifying prejudice ('showing favor') and rejecting it.

James 2:1-4:

**<sup>1</sup>My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ**

Literally this phrase declares Jesus to be the very essence of glory—

**<sup>1</sup>My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. <sup>2</sup>Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. <sup>3</sup>If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," <sup>4</sup>have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?**

There is a single command at the end of verse one, *Do not show favoritism*. We are forbidden to make judgments about people based on appearance alone, in the familiar phrase 'to judge a book by its cover.'

Recall Samuel's experience when he had been sent to, anoint as king, one of the sons of Jesse. When the oldest, Eliab, a tall and stately man (like Saul), entered the room, Samuel looked at him and thought surely this must be the Lord's anointed. But he was wrong. *The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.* (1 Samuel 16:7b) This reminder to Samuel resonates still—a person's appearance is no basis for determining their worth. God looks on the heart and we are commanded to show no favoritism.

James presses home the point with a story in verses 2-3. Two newcomers arrive at church, believers not seekers, but nothing else is known about them. One of them has all the attributes of wealth: confident bearing, fine clothing, drives up in an expensive car. The other is dressed shabbily and arrives on the bus. They are assigned different values based on these differences alone.

In addition to wealth we make surface judgments based on beauty. If someone with graceful bodily movements and lovely features enters the room we tend to be attracted to them. In contrast the hunched over person with wrinkles and warts is easily ignored. We regard the individual with

a large vocabulary and confident voice as someone worth listening to. The guy who speaks ‘street jargon’ is shunted aside. A suave manner can also be impressive. A socially skilled person with all the right moves makes a good impression, while the shy or awkward person does not.

I was listening to some old music the other day, including a Jerry Butler tune that tells the story of a guy who’s losing his girl to a charming newcomer:

*He knows all the great quotations. He says the things I wish I could say, but he’s had so many rehearsals, to him it’s just another play. He don’t love you like I love you. If he did he wouldn’t break your heart.*<sup>1</sup>

Riches, beauty, erudition, and a suave manner can all lead us to preferential treatment of people whose character and love for God are completely unknown to us. We too often pass over spiritual depth in favor ‘all the great quotations.’

James is commanding that we take seriously what’s inside a person. This takes time and a willingness to be vulnerable. We need to ask (and answer) questions that go beneath the surface. What really matters to you? How do you treat people? What do you worry about and hope for? Our quest is for relationships that honor godly character and delight in the unique gifts and history of all God’s children.

Let me make another observation before we move on. James is not arguing that everyone is exactly like everyone else. There are good reasons for seating assignments. A front row seat is reserved for an honored elder whose eyesight is dimming. The tallest person is asked to stand at the back of a crowded room. The woman with a strong singing voice is put at the center to help everyone else sing better. More importantly we ask gifted teachers to teach and mature saints to lead in prayer. We recognize the wonderful range of gifts and history in each member of the congregation and we rejoice in them. We want to know more of the Lord, and we discover him in the saints around us. Differences among us provide opportunities for blessing, not for showing favoritism (making surface judgments).

Returning to verse 1, consider Jesus who is the very glory of God. Is he more likely to be the man in rich clothes with

a gold ring or the poor man in patched clothing? Andy Burnham reminded me of a joke about a poor man who enters a church seeking the Lord only to be rebuffed by those inside. On his way out he meets the Lord, and Jesus asks him what happened, and the man explains that they wouldn’t let him in. Jesus replies, “I’ve been trying to get into that church for years, and they won’t let me in either.”

In Isaiah 53:2, Isaiah said of Jesus, *He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering.* He was a working man with calloused hands, born in a stable, a bumpkin from Galilee. He had no noteworthy formal education. In Matthew 8:20, Jesus said of himself, *The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.* What do we learn from observing him? How did he treat people? Lepers, urchins, beggars, scribes, nobles, the high and low . . . everyone was welcome. Everybody was told the truth, everyone was loved by him, and everyone was taken seriously. No favoritism.

He was the poor man (though filled with glory) who was rejected by his own people. Peter would one day write, *we were eyewitnesses of his glory* (2 Peter 1:16) and John declared, *we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth* (John 1:14). But neither of these men understood these truths for a long time—indeed, until the Lord had been raised from the dead. We are just as likely to miss the presence of Jesus in our brothers and sisters if we look mostly at external appearance.

A friend told me recently of learning to disregard tattoos. She said that for years she considered ‘body art’ to be vile and wanted nothing to do with such people. Then her son came home with three tattoos and she had to change her thinking. The result has been an opening of relationships with a number of wonderful people in the body of Christ she had been previously cut off from.

James tells the story of two newcomers (a rich man and a poor man) in church not because of what finally happens to either of them. His concern is the members of the assembly who become “judges with evil motives.” Prejudice ruins the one who makes judgments more than those categorized by it.

We become failed judges because we are insecure. We allow uncertainties about ourselves to trump what we know about the love of God. We enjoy putting people down because it makes us look better. We want to associate with those who have the appearance of authority and wealth because that makes us look more important. James' command, *do not show favoritism* (v. 1) is given to help us identify our need for God's healing, to make us aware of our own inner poverty. He wants to make us whole and free with no need to diminish others in order to gain artificial stature.

*Our glorious Lord Jesus Christ* (v. 1). May he become greater and we become less. Most frequently the Lord will make himself known by our discovery of his presence in the lives of people around us. Our welcome of the entire range of saints, all their journeys, all their histories, all their gifts, all their stories, will expand what we know of Christ. Giving up our prejudices becomes a journey of discovery.

In conclusion, consider the following as an encouragement to stand beside all of God's children:

1 Corinthians 1:26-29:

<sup>26</sup>*Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup>But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup>He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup>so that no one may boast before him.*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jerry Butler, He Don't Love You (Like I Love You) [http://www.justsomyrics.com/1280599/Jerry-Butler-He-Don't-Love-You-\(Like-I-Love-You\)-Lyrics](http://www.justsomyrics.com/1280599/Jerry-Butler-He-Don't-Love-You-(Like-I-Love-You)-Lyrics), 1960.