

Yes, God Cares Very Much 2021  
Deuteronomy 15:4-5, 7-8, 10-11 James 2:1-6, 8-9, 15-18

### Deuteronomy 15:4-5, 7-8, 10-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

### James 2:1-6a, 8-9, 15-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

During seminary, one of my classes was a travel seminar to Ghana.

The class was mostly African-American women I didn't really know,  
so we had several weekend retreats to help us get acquainted.

Also several pastors visiting from Ghana helped us prepare by  
giving us instructions about West African culture & customs.

Coming from our more affluent American life-style and culture,  
we knew very little about African traditions or proper etiquette.

Since we obviously didn't want to offend anyone,  
especially the people we were to visit and learn from,  
so we needed to learn about their culture & good manners.

For example, in Ghana whenever a group meets with another group,  
everybody always greets and shakes hands with everybody else.

It's also their custom to wave and greet only with the right hand  
because waving the left hand is considered to be an insult,  
and so I learned to keep my left hand safely tucked in my pocket.

For many years I had spent time in Richmond doing business,  
and in a 3-piece suit coming out of the Omni or Marriott hotel  
the police had always been very cooperative and respectful.

One time on the way to one of our weekend Ghana-preparation-retreats  
I was riding in the backseat with some African-American classmates,  
and when we passed by a Richmond police officer directing traffic,  
it was very noticeable that he stared at us with  
aggressive looks of open hostility & suspicion,  
**in a disquieting way that I'd never experienced in Richmond before.**

In both situations, I was the same guy, I was in the same city,  
but was perceived and treated quite differently the 2<sup>nd</sup> time,  
and I doubt that I would have believed it, had I not experienced it for myself.

It's not really that shocking for that is often the way of this world.  
But as the body of Christ, we are called to a much higher standard.

As James points out, prejudice and racism are always wrong, vs. 1-4

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

In the world's view and perspective, that rich man was far more  
important and valuable because he could give more and do more,  
so success and status made him a more worthwhile person.

But it goes against the truth of God's free gift of **gracious** love,  
to say God loves one sinful creature more than another, or to deny  
that we are all **equally sheep of the Good Shepherd's pasture,**  
**and all equally totally depend on God's grace alone.**

If God created them, then God loves them, and if God loves them,  
then so must we, and so we are commanded to show mercy  
beyond whatever limits we might prefer to establish.

As Christians, it is not our task to judge other people,  
rather, it's to bring out **their best and highest potential.**

**Our treatment of other people does matter to God, for there is  
a critical connection between our faith and what we do with it,  
and if we truly are being Good News to our neighbors.**

Naturally we notice the signs of someone's success and status,  
but if that gets translated into favoritism and partiality  
then it's incompatible and inconsistent with a life  
of Christian faith, obedience and faithfulness.

**So what distinctions – what judgments am I making about other people?  
What assumptions & personal biases do we let affect our attitude  
and how will they hold up in the light of eternity with God?**

I find that most human behavior and the motivations behind it  
are almost always far more complex than I first assumed or supposed,

- with secret things that went tragically wrong in their past,
- terrible hurts and wounds they have not been able to heal

- fears, guilt, insecurities, issues not yet resolved,  
**and all of that can still have significant power to influence us.**

There is almost always far more going on with behavior and attitude  
than we can understand or recognize on the external surface...

**... and if we knew more about their wounds, hurts and struggles,  
we'd be far more compassionate, gentle and understanding,  
far more involved in the hurts & needs of those around us  
by reflecting God unrestrained love for all of humanity.**

The book of Deuteronomy is addressed to the people in the wilderness  
with much to learn before they're ready to live in the Promised Land,  
for God's gift of the land came with some strings attached,  
some crucial responsibilities associated with God's gift.

First, on the blessing and promise side of the equation: vs.4

"There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that  
the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy."

Now that is an incredibly bold statement --- describing the ideal,  
"There will, however, be no one in need among you."

God gave Israel good and productive land, flowing with milk and honey  
where there was more than enough for all to share in abundance.

As a people blessed by God, they were responsible to provide,  
**by sharing, by being** a compassionate and merciful community,  
a people with whom God could entrust with material blessings.

But in the next verses Moses addresses another reality,  
that God's blessings of abundance would be corrupted,  
and while some acquired way more than they needed,  
others would lack even their most basic needs... so, vs. 7 & 11

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that  
the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. Since there  
will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy  
neighbor in your land."

The message is this: **there will always be opportunity to obey & serve.**

So you must never forget that you are the descendants,  
of the oppressed slaves in Egypt and powerless outcasts,  
and who once suffered harsh oppression and exploitation,  
**but** God heard their cry and gave you this land as a gift.

Therefore by your compassionate care and treatment of those in need,  
you will reflect God's own compassion, gracious blessings & gifts,  
thereby fulfilling God's will, intention and purpose,  
by being a compassionate, humane & merciful community.

God's warning and command to Israel was quite simple.

As God hears their cries back when exploited under Egyptian bondage,  
so too, God would hear the cries of the poor in need  
if Israel ignored or exploited the needy in their land.

Since God does care about the well-being of the needy and vulnerable,  
generosity and kindness to neighbor and stranger in need

was to characterize the blessed and gifted people of Israel,  
**as an expression of gratitude for God's promises fulfilled.**

Because you have freely received from God's grace and blessings,  
**and know that you are loved, redeemed and sustained by your God,**  
there is also an awareness of God's abiding presence,  
that permeates and pervades all areas of your life.

**God's Holy presence will bring deep change into our lives,  
which is visible, which is practical, tangible and real.**

According to James, the most clear and visible change  
when Jesus enters our life is our treatment of other people,  
**but it's not always giving them what they say they want.**

One afternoon a man reeking with alcohol came by my church office,  
and wanted me to give him a few dollars to help meet his needs.  
When I turned him down and offered a sack lunch instead,  
he snared angrily,  
"But aren't you Christians supposed help poor people in need?"  
**Our help and what we offer must be tempered with good sense and wisdom.**

James illustrates in characteristically blunt language: vs. 8-9

You do well if you really fulfill **the royal law** according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

Our call is to reflect God's unrestricted love **for all of humanity,**  
by being equitable and charitable to their best interest and need,  
regardless of outward appearances or any biases that influence,  
**by treating every person as God has graciously treated us.**

There was nothing wrong or inappropriate  
with treating that rich man with hospitality and respect,  
**but it ought to be the same for the poor man as well.**

**We're called to live & reflect God's own gracious kindness & mercy.**  
And one measure of our faith, the authenticity of our faith,  
and a test of our church as a faith community of Christians,  
is in **how well we treat one another, and the outsider.**

As Jesus explained in Matthew 25:40

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Faith means demonstrating clearly God's love for all of humanity,  
and **our faith is the fire that burns within us,** while  
our **good deeds and attitude are the smoke from that fire...**

... as James explains, vs. 15-18

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

Today, as we gather for this meal at the Lord's Table,  
it is an ideal time to consider and self-examine how we are living,  
and that perhaps maybe we have slipped or stumbled into  
some of the corrupt ideas, ways & values of this world.

**So what do my words, my deeds, my attitudes and my secret thoughts,  
reveal about the truth and progress of my journey of faith?**

This is not about wallowing in guilt, or by crushing regret and shame,  
but it is asking in honest self-examination,  
where am I most in need of God's transforming power?,  
**and could I somehow be blocking or hindering  
the good that God might accomplish through me?**

It is here at the Lord's Table that we are reminded once again  
of God's abiding love, of the healing and grace in Jesus Christ,  
and our hope in God's truth and promise to heal and transform,

as once again **we receive and feast upon the Lord's gracious love**  
as nourishment toward a life that does **more closely reflect**  
**the love, peace and grace, the promises and presence of God.**