

Reasons Against Favoritism

James 2:5-7
ABC 5/19/19

It's reported that shortly after the close of the Civil War (June, 1865), a black man entered a fashionable white church in the South one Sunday morning. When the time for communion came, he walked down the aisle & knelt at the altar. A rustle of shock & anger swept through the congregation. A distinguished layman stood up, stepped forward to the altar & knelt beside his colored brother.¹ Here's a newspaper clipping that describe this event from an eyewitness who was among those offended. The head line reads, *Negro Communed at St. Paul's Church*,²

Colonel T. L. Broun ... said: ... It was communion day ... amongst those who first arose & advanced to the communion table was a tall, well dressed negro man; very black ... This was a great surprise & shock to the communicants & others present, who frequented that most noted of ... Churches in Virginia. Its effect upon the communicants was startling, & for several moments they retained their seats in solemn silence, & did not move, being deeply chagrined ... General Robert E. Lee was present, & he, ignoring the action & very presence of the negro, immediately arose, in his usual dignified & self-possessed manner, walked up the aisle of the church to the chancel rail, & reverently knelt down to partake of the communion, & not far from where the negro was. This lofty conception of duty by General Lee, under such provoking & irritating circumstances, had a magic effect upon the other communicants, who immediately went forward to the communion table. I, being one of the number, did likewise.³

This account is obviously open to interpretation.⁴ We may not live in the South at the close of the Civil War era. We may not live in Victorian England with its pride & prejudice in other areas of society. We may not live in the Roman empire during the time the book of James was written. But we do live on planet Earth & whether our discrimination, partiality, pride & prejudice is racial in nature (like in that story) or toward those in rags (like the story James tells that we looked at last week), or whether we simply judge people by externals & look down on some because of the world's way of thinking, all such sin has no place in the blood-bought fellowship of the crucified Savior who died to not only save & bring together all types of humanity, but to atone for our sin at the cross. Our Lord's death purchased the Lord's people from every tribe, tongue, nation, & people. We saw last week there's application for all of us in this text, whether or not we feel this particular illustration is a sin of ours. As vs 9 says, it's sin anytime partiality is being shown. Or as vs 1 says,

¹ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations*, #4739

² *Richmond Times Dispatch*, April 16, 1905, p 5

³ <https://leefamilyarchive.org/reference/essays/schwarz/index.html>

⁴ www.civilwarmonitor.com/blog/fantasizing-lee-as-a-civil-rights-pioneer

God is forbidding any attitude within us of personal favoritism, favoring, & focusing on certain types of people to the neglect of others we consider less important. Or as vs 3 says, when we pay special attention to only certain types of people based on externals & worldly values, or as vs 4 says, any distinctions or discriminations because we have judged somebody with sinful thinking, none of that has any place in the church of Jesus Christ. What's at stake here is no small thing. It's the very gospel itself. It's God's glory, which is the most important thing in the universe. It's as valuable as the precious blood of Christ Himself. The Lord's glory & His gospel of grace through faith is how this text begins in vs 1, which sets the tone for the chapter. **1:26-2:13** PRAY

James is pointing out the clear inconsistency between God's character & the attitude of a Christian who is disrespectful or dishonoring of the poor. James is saying, in effect, *To be partial to the rich & turn your backs on the poor cannot possibly correspond to God's character, Word, or will.* Partiality is inconsistent with God's divinely choosing the poor & the rich not only don't usually respect you but are inclined to blaspheme your faith. When you go against the poor & outcasts, you go against those whom the Lord has specially chosen. & when you favor the rich, you often are siding with blasphemers. Having illustrated & condemned (2-4) the discrimination he prohibits (1), James now explains why such favoritism is wrong.

1. Favoritism Contradicts the Mind of God 5-6a

James says, **listen**, to those who weren't looking to the needs of others in the body of Christ. He wants the attention of those who haven't been giving proper attention to some who may be more needy than them & not able to do anything in return. He's pleading to them with emotion & passion & love when he adds, **Listen, my beloved brethren**. James wants these Christians' attention & he speaks with affection to these fellow Jewish believers who should be loving all those in the family of Christ. This is so important because partiality is inconsistent with the gospel we say we believe (1). For us to dishonor or neglect the poor or the lowly **of this world** in the church, by excluding or ignoring them is the opposite of what God has done for us. If Jesus is **glorious**, the **Lord of glory**, & He is, we contradict & corrupt God's glory when we dishonor those He came to save. When we consider as less important anyone in the body of Christ, we treat Jesus' shed blood, His death, as

less important than it is, God as less glorious than He is, & His gospel of electing, saving grace as less amazing than it is. When we neglect our brethren who are in rags, like the guy in the end of vs 2, or give him a lower seat, like the end of vs 3, we neglect the fact that in God's sight all of us have nothing but filthy rags to offer. It's only by God choosing to save us that we're saved! The glory of the gospel is that Jesus takes some of the most poor, needy, lowly, & lonely who are destined for hell, & by His grace alone, He makes them rich in faith & heirs who are destined for heaven (5). 2 Cor 5:21 says, **God made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.** Jesus was made sin that we might be made righteous. At the cross, Jesus takes the filthy rags of sin from the redeemed & trades them His perfect robes of righteousness, crediting believers with His perfect righteous life. Jesus laid aside His royal robes & regal rights above to be down here, trading heaven's praises for earth's prejudice & pain, to be mocked & maligned even by his own brothers, including the author, James, earlier in his life (Jn 7:1-5). Jesus gave up temporarily & voluntarily the glories of heaven to hear people insult & revile Him falsely. Instead of His rightful crown as King of kings, He gets a crown of thorns from pagan soldiers & a name tag on His cross that said, **King of the Jews.** Instead of the nations being under His feet, men from the Roman nation nail His feet & hands to a tree that His hands had created. They murdered the One who gave them life. The amazing truth is that Jesus chose to not only save many poor & lowly, He chose to become poor & lowly to do so. He went from splendor to a stable, from majesty to a manger, to be born to a poor but humble couple, so that all who are spiritually poor & humble can be born again. Jesus became Son of Man so we might become adopted sons & daughters of God. The Prince became a pauper. The Master became a servant that we might be part of His kingdom. He had no home on earth so that we might have a home in heaven. He died so we can live. He became poor to make His chosen rich. Jesus went from riches in heaven to rags on earth so that others in rags here could have riches in heaven. & not just in the next life, this vs speaks of how God chooses to save certain physically poor people & to make them spiritually rich, rich in faith in the here & now. When we are prejudiced we've forgotten the work of the gospel in our own life. Why is that God accepted you? Why is it you've been forgiven? Is it your position,

appearance, wealth, race, or class? Of course not. Everyone who comes to Christ comes absolutely poor. We come with nothing to bring, nothing in our hands. There is nothing we could bring to Christ to somehow gain His favor. We come naked & poor with nothing going for us. We have just one plea, it is His blood, grace, & righteousness. This is the heart of the gospel & height of God's glory. As the gospel of Luke begins, the good news, the gospel 1st came to poor shepherds, the lowly ones in society:

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news or the gospel of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths & lying in a manger." & suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God & saying, "Glory to God in the highest" ... The shepherds went back, glorifying & praising God (Lk 2:10-14, 20).

Before this, in Lk 1, Mary magnifies & glorifies the Lord for His good news, saying, **He has brought down rulers from their thrones, & has exalted those who were humble or lowly. HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; & sent away the rich empty-handed (52-53).** When we reverse this pattern in the church, James says, we're reversing the very nature of the gospel. Don't exalt the high & mighty who God will bring down & don't send away the lowly & needy who Christ called to come unto Him to be filled. In Lk 4, Jesus was being glorified & praised as He taught (15). Then we read,

He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; & as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, & stood up to read. & the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. & He opened the book & found the place where it was written, "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, & RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." & He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant & sat down; & the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. & He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (16-21).

Two chpts later we read, **turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20).** Poverty itself doesn't automatically save or bless or guarantee a place in God's kingdom, but the context & parallel makes clear that realizing one's spiritual poverty is the way to heaven (Mt 5:3). The gospel is for people in physical distress & neediness who recognize their spiritual distress & neediness. They then come to the Lord who has called them as spiritual beggars with humble hearts & plead with God to have mercy on them

through the cross of Christ. The wonder of Js 2:5 is that *God makes the poor of this world rich in faith!* Faith is God's gift to us & is the point at which our conscious Christian experience begins as we respond to Jesus by placing our faith in Him (Jn 1:12; Acts 16:31; Gal 2:16). If we disregard the poor & fail to help meet their needs, we disregard God Himself. As believers, we've been reborn with God's own nature & we're to reflect His great love & care for those in need. That is the essence of who we're to be.

The end of the vs says they **love the Lord**, but their love is the result of God's choice, not the cause of it. This is describing the result of salvation, not the means to it. Salvation is completely by God's grace & is received by faith alone (Eph 2:8-9). But when God lavishes His grace on us, we respond by loving Him because He 1st loved us (1 Jn 4:7-10, 19). Partiality toward the rich & against the poor (or, partiality based on any external factors) is wrong because it puts us in the place of judge & it puts us in the place of God who chooses. By showing favoritism, we usurp the role that belongs to God alone, who makes sovereign choices. It's as our love arises from & responds to God's love for us (Jn 14:21, 23; 16:27; 1 Jn 4:19; Rom 5:5; 8:28; Gal 5:22; 2 Tim 4:8) that we enter into His promised blessings, both in the present & in the future. James speaks of the rich sphere of blessing into which we've been brought, for we are **heirs of the kingdom**. The idea of the kingdom of God figures prominently in Jesus' teaching. James shows his familiarity to the Lord's teaching by using **kingdom** as a summary word for the entire sphere of blessing into which we've already entered. Entering into the kingdom is entering into the life which Jesus gives (Mk 9:45, 47); to be in the kingdom is to be saved (Lk 18:25-26).

It would be incorrect to conclude that poor people are innately better, or that rich people are inherently worse, & that's the basis of God's choosing. That's not what the Scripture says. We're not to despise the poor nor the rich. But it's clear that God has a love & care for the poor & needy, orphans & widows, & others the world often overlooks. He has a special place for them in His heart. But this sovereign love of God that chooses especially to save from these ranks doesn't mean God has no love for the rich & no type of care for other classes of people. The gospels record that even the rich young ruler who rejected Jesus was loved by Him even as the young man walked away. As

far as we know, the man never trusted Christ & wasn't one of those chosen, as James 2:5 calls them. But Jesus loved him (Mk 10:21). We don't have to reconcile God's love for sinners & the fact that He hasn't chosen to save all sinners, we just have to recognize whatever the Bible says & believe it even if we don't comprehend it. But James clearly joins other NT writers in attributing our salvation & status in the kingdom to God's own choice. God chooses those who are saved apart from any merit or qualifications on the part of those chosen. Salvation isn't offered to anyone on the basis of anything that God sees or foresees in that person. He doesn't choose the rich man to get his money for the kingdom. God doesn't choose the poor man because of his poverty. God doesn't 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 & purpose (Rom 9:11-16). James doesn't stop here to explain or defend the doctrine of God's sovereign election. He assumes his readers know & believe this, & so he uses it as a reason why they're wrong to favor the rich & despise the poor. When they do this, they align themselves against God, who often chooses the poor to be rich in faith & leaves the rich to perish along with their wealth (Js 5:1-6). It's always wrong to reject what biblical truth we don't understand or can't reconcile in our own minds. It's also wrong to conclude all poor people are saved, or that rich people can't be saved. If poverty inherently brought salvation, Scripture would never have commanded us to help alleviate it. That wouldn't make any sense. & the NT records several people God saved who had wealth (Zaccheus, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea). But, as Paul writes,

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, & God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, & the base things of the world & the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, (literally, non-entities, nobodies), so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God (1 Cor 1:26-29).

Generally, the ones whom God has chosen are those who are poor as the world reckons poverty. Therefore, to dishonor the poor (2-3) is to contradict the mind of God Himself. Or, in terms of vs 1, it's to choose another glory as exceeding the glory of Jesus Himself. Again, it's not that there's not anyone chosen by God that aren't poor, but not many. God intentionally chooses the most unlikely to make a church unexplainable by the world as to why we're all so close, yet so different. He does

it that way so there's no question as to the source of salvation & no debate as to where the glory goes. If a church chooses to focus attention & energy on others who are more impressive by outward human standards & to dishonor those who aren't, those whom God delights to choose & save, it turns upside-down God's very purposes & reverses the gospel! If you think about it, you'll realize there will be no poor people in heaven in any sense, no second-class citizens. Everyone will be rich in the things that matter eternally. Every believer will receive the same eternal life, the same heavenly citizenship in the kingdom of God, & the same perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to them by the Father. Every one of His children will live in His house & bask alike in His presence & love (Jn 14:1-3). Therefore, why be partial or play favorites here? How can we claim to be a child of God & yet think & act so differently from Him? It's inconsistent. The 2nd Inconsistency is that...

2. Partiality Aligns You with God's Enemies Apparently, James had knowledge that some of the Christian Jews scattered abroad were discriminating against the poor in their **assemblies, their** Christian gatherings. **You have dishonored the poor man**, he says in vs 6. He then asks the 1st of 3 parallel questions, each expecting a positive answer.

A. Isn't it the rich who oppress you? (6b). James isn't prejudiced against the rich, that would go against his whole point. But he's concerned about the sin of glorifying the rich or famous or influential or mighty, not only because all glory must go to God alone, but because it opposes the very gospel. & for the original readers, it was predominantly the rich who were opposing & oppressing God's people. What were the rich people doing to the mostly poor Christians? Oppressing them. This indicates an ongoing action, &, at the very least, it implies current action. They're undergoing poor treatment by the rich, a group to whom they still defer. How did they **oppress**? It could be for the same things James rebukes them for in Js 5:4-5.

Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, & which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; & the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth & led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

In the historical context, James is writing to Christian Jews who'd been dispersed abroad. Most were persecuted & poor. Often they worked the land of the small upper class, the wealthy landowners

who were notorious for injustice & oppression. In the 1st-century Middle East a small group of wealthy landowners & merchants accumulated more & more land & power, while large numbers of people were forced from their land & grew even poorer. Rich people were undoubtedly using their wealth & influence to oppress the poor. Things that still happen today & in every age. Forcing people to forfeit their land for late payment of mortgages, insisting on ruinous interest rates, & the like, are probably in view as James writes this.⁵ Why would you favor those who oppress you just because their rich?

B. Isn't It the rich who personally drag you into court? (6c) In that day, if a creditor met a debtor on the street, he could seize him by the neck of his robe & drag him to the courts of law.⁶ James is saying, *Haven't you been listening to the prayer requests shared among you? How often do you hear of someone in your church being dragged off to court by the ungodly rich, the ones who can pay for lawyers, litigation, lawsuits? A lot! Why do you favor them & show them partiality?* The rich people the congregation is trying to please are the same people oppressing them. The verb **drag** denotes violence, either physical or legal. James doesn't explain why the rich press charges against the poor, but one common motive was to gain more land in property disputes. Another option envisions the rich as attempting to collect debts the poor owed them, an action that would likely result in the poor being thrown into debtor's prison. 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 honoring your executioners & injuring your own friends.⁷ James points out how ridiculous it is to cater to people who treat you, the poor, like this. He doesn't, however, condemn the rich for being rich; his criticism condemns their actions.

C. Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? (7) The literal rendering, **which has been called upon you**, is used of 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 Savior, Jesus Christ. We don't know the specific situation here. It could be the rich Gentiles were mocking the Christians'

⁵ Douglas Moo, *James*, pp 108-109

⁶ William Barclay, *Letters of James & Peter*, p 67

⁷ *Calvin's Commentaries*, pp 303-304

God or the rich Jews were criticizing the Christian claims about Jesus. It may refer to unbelievers making fun of Christian morality & worship. We don't know the details, but we do know that the **fair name** refers to Jesus, which was slandered & blasphemed by enemies of the church. **Fair** means beautiful, honorable, & excellent. This highlights the ugliness & disgracefulness of the blasphemy. James is saying, *Don't you realize that the rich profane the name of your Lord, promote civil & religious hostility, & cause you unbelievable hardship & misery?* By siding with these rich, the church itself was aligning itself with blasphemers. Christians belong to Christ. Why would Christians show partiality to those who mock Christ & His followers? Why would they align themselves with those who blaspheme Him? Not only was their physical & financial oppression coming mainly from those with wealth, but apparently their spiritual oppression was primarily from the upper class as well.

By which you have been called emphasizes the believer's personal relationship to & identity with Jesus Christ. The very name *Christian* means *Christ's ones*, those who belong to & identify themselves with Christ & have the great privilege of expressing His love & impartiality. To have a name called on someone suggests the idea of ownership. Has Christianity been mocked & Christ blasphemed since the beginning? Of course. They've found ancient graffiti from around 200 AD mocking Christians, such as a crucified man with the head of a donkey being worshipped. The caption crudely written in Greek, not unlike what you might see in a restroom stall today, *Alexamenos worships his God*.⁸ The early church father Tertullian writes that Christians, along with Jews, were accused of worshipping a deity with the head of a donkey. He also mentions an apostate Jew who carried around Carthage a caricature of a Christian with donkey's ears & hooves, labeled the *God of the Christians begotten of a donkey (Deus Christianorum Onocoetes)*.⁹ In our day, the honorable name of our Lord who owns us is also blasphemed & dishonored. The noble name of our Lord & Savior is dragged through the mud & used as every type of curse. Why would we cater or defer or be partial to such people?

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexamenos_graffito

⁹ *Apologeticum*

In case you think you're not guilty of what James talks about here, let me ask, *This past week, how much time did you spend praying for, thinking of, talking to, or seeking to serve those more needy & lonely among us?* The point of James 2 applies to you whether or not a rich celebrity walks through the doors on Sunday that you focus on to the neglect of talking to the needy among us. This applies to our ongoing interactions with one another. If we would follow our Lord, it must be our glory, as it was His, to be continually on the side of the poor, the underprivileged, the disadvantaged, & the oppressed. To do this is to identify ourselves with the very heart of God & to live obediently to His clearly revealed will.¹⁰ When we love & receive all kinds of people, it shows that God's ways are becoming our ways. Do we show partiality in pride, selfishly ignoring some in our church body? The simple question, *Do you play favorites?* humbles us. Our failure obligates us to humble ourselves before the Lord & acknowledge our sin. We must continually pray something like this: *Lord, I'm a sinner & I can't stop sinning. I play favorites. I'm stained by the world. I ignore the needy. My only hope is Your mercy. Forgive me, for Jesus' sake, & for Your glory.* This humble prayer is good for us all. It's good for those who are unsure if they're right with God. At least they realize they're a sinner. It speaks to those who hope they're going to heaven because they're trying so hard to be good. It says that however hard you try, you'll never be good enough to earn heaven. But God is gracious enough to give heaven to those who repent & believe. Prayers of repentance are also good for those who know & love Jesus & have already experienced His forgiveness of their sins. Because we sin daily, we need to repent daily, ask for grace daily, & rest in the gospel daily. We'll never pass all the tests all the time. We slip & we sin. But thank God, Jesus passed all these tests for us & made us members of His family. In the gospel He has cared for us in our poverty & distress. The more we think on what James says here, the more it gives a really practical focus to a constant problem in Christian living. James offers us 3 pointers to correct our reactions to people. 1) Think of Jesus as the true glory. He came right down to the poorest level, identifying Himself with the least & worst. If our faith rests with Him who is glorious, then how shall we behave? We won't be partial & show favoritism. 2) James urges us to think of the

¹⁰ John Stott, *The Message of James*, p 89

mind of God. What choice did He make? He humbled Himself & came to earth to save us, the poor & the needy. We must be like Him. 3) James reminds us of our new position, that we have been made rich in faith & hope. We are God's heirs & have been called by His name. In that way, then, will the family likeness of such a Father show itself in us? Earthly riches fade in the presence of the real regal splendor of the King of kings & Lord of lords. We will all be singing one song in eternity all on the same level with our faces to the ground, all honor & glory to the Lord alone who humbled Himself to death. How can we not be humble in this life & put others before ourselves & our sinful prejudices? How can we reject those whom God has accepted? Who are we to reject those whom God has chosen? The ground is level at the cross. This being so, it's absurd to be partial toward anyone. All should be treated equally as beings created in the image of God. Rich & poor should be given equal treatment. Discrimination or favoritism is spiritually irrational. Therefore, **my brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.**