

James
Pride and Prejudice, (Part 1)
James 2:1-13
September 18, 2005
Tom Pennington, Pastor
Countryside Bible Church

Well, we return again, to the wonderful letter of James, the half-brother of our Lord, written to those Jews, whom he had formerly pastored, who are now scattered all over that portion of the world, as a result of the persecution. We come today, to chapter 2, to a passage that's very familiar to most of us who've been raised in church. And yet, I'm confident that you will learn some things this morning, that you didn't know before about this passage, as I have, even this week. That's the beauty and richness of the Word of God.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days, he read the Gospels, and seriously considered converting to Christianity. But apparently, Gandhi's permanent rejection of the Christian faith and of Christ, as the head of that faith, grew out of an incident that happened when he was a young man, practicing law in South Africa. He'd studied the Bible. He'd studied the teachings of Christ. And so, he decided to attend a worship service of the Christian church. As he came up the steps of this large church, a white South African barred his way to the door. As he records it, the man asked Gandhi in a sort of a belligerent tone of voice, "Where do you think you're going, Kafur?" Gandhi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here." The man responded. "There's no room for Kafirs in this church. Why don't you go worship with your own people?" Gandhi left the church, and never returned.

In James 2, James addresses the continuing presence of that kind of attitude and the danger of it in the life of the church of Jesus Christ. Because we are sinful, because we are prone to pride, it is very common for all human beings to sit in judgment on the value of other human beings, equally made in the image of God. It demonstrates itself in a variety of ways. And James addresses that sin in its ugly colors, here, in this passage before us, today. Let me read it for you, James 2:1-13. You follow along as I read.

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with *an attitude of* personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes,

Available online at: www.countrysidebible.org
Copyright © 2005 Tom Pennington. All rights reserved.
Unedited transcript for personal use only.

and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” have you not made distinctions among your selves, and become judges with evil motives? Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin *and* are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

In this paragraph, that’s very much to the point, filled with a number of profound thoughts, as we’ll see them unfold, James teaches us this very basic proposition: As followers of Jesus Christ, we must never tolerate the sin of prejudice, partiality, and favoritism in ANY of its ungodly forms. His message, here, is fairly simply structured: two basic elements. In verses 1 to 4, we have the admonition against favoritism, prejudice, and partiality; and in verses 5 to 13, the arguments against favoritism, prejudice, and partiality.

Let’s first look at the first 4 verses: the Admonition. Notice he begins with a very straightforward command in verse 1. “My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.” Now the connection of this verse with what has just gone before it is fairly clear. He ended chapter 1 by talking about those in the society who are easily taken advantage of; who are treated unfairly. You remember in verse 27, he refers to the plight of the widows and the orphans. When he comes to chapter 2:1 - 13, he now turns to the plight of the poor, and how they’re treated in the church. He begins, “My brethren my fellow Christians, don’t hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” Stop there for a moment. I love that expression. Remember who’s writing this letter. It is James, the half-brother of our Lord, raised in the same home with Christ, probably next to Christ, the oldest in the family. He would’ve sat under the ministry of Christ, after the death of Joseph, a sort of surrogate father.

And yet, it was through the life of Christ, he rejected his brother's claims. And it was after the resurrection when he saw Christ raised from the dead that he embraced Him. And now, here, he says, "He is our glorious, Sovereign Jesus, the Messiah!"

The construction of verse one implies that the problem James is going to deal with in the flow of this passage was a real problem to these Jewish Christians. The implication is not, "Don't do this;" but really "STOP DOING THIS." What exactly is the nature of the sin he's going to address? He says, "Stop tolerating an attitude of personal favoritism." What exactly is that? Well, the Greek word is a compound word, that's translated "personal favoritism". It's a compound word. That means it's two Greek words put together. Literally translated, it means "to receive the face." This word does not appear in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Nor does it appear in secular Greek. It was apparently coined by Jewish Christians familiar with the Old Testament, in an attempt to translate a familiar Hebrew expression. You see, in the Old Testament, there is an expression of partiality that's literally translated, or that, literally translated, means "to lift up the face". It was used of a judge, who was partial, and raised the face of someone unjustly; who gave someone what they didn't deserve, in an unfair and an unjust way. Eventually, this word came to refer to any form of preferential treatment.

It's a very hard word to translate into English. I'm not particularly fond of personal favoritism. And the reason is, we use several different English words to encapsulate what this one Greek word, encapsulates. We speak of favoritism. Favoritism is showing special favor and benefit to someone based solely on external circumstances. But this word includes that. It also includes our word, "prejudice." Prejudice, of course, is the unfair treatment of someone based solely on external circumstances. The Greek word includes both of those concepts, both extremes, treating someone favorably, based on external circumstances in an unjust way; and treating someone poorly, with contempt, in an unjust way because of merely external factors. James Hiebert, in his commentary, says, "This word always denotes favoritism, or partiality; a biased judgment based on external circumstances, such as race, wealth, social rank, or popularity, while disregarding the individual's intrinsic merit."

Throughout the Old and the New Testament, God takes special pains to declare to us, that He is NEVER, EVER GUILTY OF THIS SIN! It's repeated, constantly, throughout both testaments. Listen to Deuteronomy 10:17 and 18.

"For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of Lords, the GREAT, THE MIGHTY, and the awesome God who does not show partiality, nor take a

bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien, by giving him food and clothing. And over and over, again, throughout the Old Testament, you have this ringing cry of God's impartiality.

The same is true when you come to the New Testament. Even the Pharisees, in Matthew 22, when they come to Christ, say, "We understand that you are one who doesn't show favoritism. You're not partial." I believe even the enemies of Christ saw this quality of our God, in Christ.

Turn to Romans 2. Here Paul puts it very clearly. Romans 2, in the context of God's judgment, God's coming judgment on mankind. He says, in verse 11, "For there is no partiality with God." Ephesians 6:9, Paul makes the same point in the context of telling earthly masters to be careful to treat those who serve them well. He says, "And masters, do the same things to them and give up threatening, knowing that both their master and yours is in Heaven, and there is no partiality with Him." God is unimpressed by who's the master and who's the servant. There's no partiality.

Colossians 3, in the same sort of context Colossians 3:25: "For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality." First Peter, Peter, in his first letter, verse 17 in chapter 1, says, "If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay *on earth*." Over and over again, God says, "I am absolutely impartial, uninfluenced by unimportant external factors." Therefore, because it is such an affront to God's holy character, He says that we, as His people, must be careful to be impartial, as well.

Again, this is repeated throughout both testaments. Let me just give you a couple of examples: Deuteronomy 1:17, Moses writes, "You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God's." Deuteronomy 16:19: he writes, "You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue." And then, turning to the New Testament, another example of this command to us is found in 1 Timothy 5: Paul, writing to Timothy about the issue of disciplining elders of the church who sin. He's told them that their sin must be dealt with. And he ends that admonition with these words, 1 Timothy 5:21: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality." God is without partiality. And His people are commanded to be, as well.

But what, exactly, is this sin that God has forbidding, here? Well, let me, first of all, correct a misunderstanding. He is not talking (James is not) about a strict kind of egalitarianism, where everyone is exactly equal. In other words, it's O.K. to notice factual distinctions between people. It's true: some individuals are more intelligent. Some individuals are more gifted. He gave different people different abilities and skills and finances and opportunities. No two people are exactly equal in every sense. That's not what he's talking about. It's O.K. to see those factual distinctions. Nor is James forbidding us to show honor to those who are superior to us in authority, age, gifts, etc. (and therefore disserving more honor). Over and over again, Scripture admonishes us to show them special honor. Leviticus 19:32, "You shall rise up before the grayheaded, and honor the age." Ephesians 6:2, "Honor your father and mother." First Peter 2:17, "Honor the king." So, he's not saying that we can't make factual distinctions. And he's not saying that we can't give honor to whom honor is due.

He's attacking the sin of partiality. And partiality means two things. The sin of "personal favoritism," as it's translated in James 2, means,

Number 1: to show special consideration, favor or attention to someone, based solely on external factors.

And Number 2: it means to show contempt for someone, based on external factors. Now, if you look at James 2 in the English Bible, in the New American Standard, that we have, "personal favoritism" is singular. In the Greek text, it's plural. Probably best to translate it "acts of impartial or of partiality, rather; acts of partiality." The clear implication that James is giving here, is that there're a variety of ways in which favoritism can be shown. In fact, there're as many variations as there are sinful human hearts. There're any number of ways that we can be prejudice, or we can show favor. You can show partiality on the basis of, as here in James 2, on the basis of dress, on the basis of appearance, the basis of personality, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, wealth, skills, intelligence. You can treat people differently because of the car they drive, because of the neighborhood they live in, because of their home, because of the color of their skin. And on and on it goes! There are an endless number of ways that you and I can make an external determination that someone lacks value, or they have value, that we attribute to them, solely on the basis of external factors.

Now, what are some of the very practical ways this sin manifests itself? Those are the bases on which we are prejudice, or we show favoritism. But how, exactly, does it express itself? Well, here's just a short list I jotted down.

At the most extreme end, prejudice shows itself in harming, or physically attacking or abusing another person. Then there's hateful speech. Our world is filled with this. In fact, this past week, I was doing something that drives our wives crazy, men. I hit the scan button on the radio. You know, I just wanted to see what's out there. So, I'm cycling through the stations. And, there was one that I just had to stop on, because here was a man that would be described in the culture as a radical right-wing conservative. And this man was spewing forth all kinds of hateful speech about various groups for various reasons. That's a violation of this command. Sometimes it takes the form of jokes and ridicule about someone or a different group. Hasty generalizations: you know, "Everybody at that particular race is" ... and you fill in the blank. Or "People who are from Alabama are...." I can pick on Alabama. "People who wear their hair like that are always...." It's a form of this sin. Another form it takes is snubbing: simply refusing to associate with certain people, because of those external factors. Sometimes, it's being upset, or disappointed with certain people or, or I should say, being disappointed when certain people show up at your event, at your office, at your group, or in this church.

On the positive end, showing favoritism, one expression of it is gravitating always to those who are most like you, and staying away from anyone who is unlike you; sort of staying in those comfortable cliques, just ignoring others. Oftentimes, though, the sin of either favoritism or prejudice, the sin of partiality may simply go on in the mind. Many people are guilty of this sin, and no one else ever knows it. They simply sit, in their minds, they set up court, if you will, in their minds, and everywhere they go, they find themselves making value judgments about the quality of other people, compared to themselves. And guess what? They always come out on top. That's certainly contrary to the Spirit of Christ, in James 2:3, where we're told, "We're to regard one another as more important than ourselves, just as He, Himself, did." So, James gives us a very straight-forward command: "Stop holding on to your faith in Christ in one hand, and holding on to partiality in the other!"

Now to illustrate what this sin looks like in real life, James chooses one possible example of many to show us just how ugly this sin really looks. In verses 2 and 3, we see this example. Verse 2: "If a man comes into your assembly ..." Literally, "into your synagogue." The word, "synagogue" means "assembly," or "a place of assembly." Remember, James is the first New Testament book that was written, most likely. It was written in the 40s A.D., somewhere between ten and fifteen years after the resurrection of Christ. So, most Christians, at this point, are of Jewish ancestry. And their familiar name for the assembly of those who worship the true God was "synagogue." And so that's what it's called, here. That was slowly changing, by the way. In fact, later in this ep in this letter, James refers to the assembly of believers as "the

ecclesia,” the “church,” that name that be is so much a part of the vocabulary of the apostle, Paul. It’s clear, here, though, that James doesn’t mean a Jewish synagogue, because he refers to them in verse one as Christians. And then in verse 2, he says, “Your assembly.” And in verses 2 and 3 it’s equally clear that the Christians to whom he writes are in charge of what’s going on. So, James is speaking, here, of the Christian church.

But that raises another question. What, exactly, is the nature of this meeting that’s described in these verses? Well, some scholars have raised the interesting possibility that since most of the Old Testament references to partiality occur in the context of a judge, that this must be the convening of the church’s leadership, to hear a case between two Christian brothers. In that case, it would be an illustration of what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 6, where the leadership of the church decides between two disputing Christians. While that’s interesting and intriguing, I don’t think it’s the most likely scenario. More likely, the illustration here comes from the normal gathering of the church for corporate worship, just like we’ve done this morning. And these two men come in.

Now, who are these two men? Well, they obviously are not members or regular attenders. They had to be shown where to sit. None of you had to be shown this morning, if you’re a part of our church, where to sit. You understand how the thing works. When you read this passage, it’s clear that the whole thing seems unfamiliar to these two men. They’re guests. And they were there, probably for one of two reasons. Either, they were unbelieving visitors, who’d been invited by someone in the congregation. Or perhaps in a small community, they’d heard about this group of Jews who believe the Messiah had come. And out of curiosity, they came to see. Another possibility is that they were new converts. In that context, you would usually come to faith in Christ through the witness and testimony of a family member, or a friend. And then you would come to the assembly of believers. So, it’s possible, either of those, that they were either unbelieving visitors who had come, or they were recent converts, who are now joining the assembly of believers.

But while they share either the same kind of curiosity or a recent commitment to follow Christ, that’s all they share. They have almost nothing else in common. These two men come from two totally different socio-economic conditions, different backgrounds, different upbringings, different status, different reputations, different social connections, different occupations, different vocabulary, different neighborhood, different possessions, different appearance. They were different in every way.

Now notice the snapshot James gives us of these two men. In verse 2, notice the rich man. He comes in with a gold ring, literally, “gold-fingered”. The picture is of a guy wearing many rings. In the ancient world it was common for the wealthy to wear a number of rings as sort of a sign of their wealth. Especially this was true of the Romans. In fact, the Roman historian, Seneca, writes, “We adorn our fingers with rings, and we distribute gems over every joint.” There were even shops in ancient Rome where you could rent rings for special occasions, like we rent tuxedos; because that was the sign of your wealth. This was such a typical, ostentatious display in the culture, that the early church father, Clement of Alexandria, wrote that Christians ought to only wear one ring, and it ought to depict some symbol of the Christian faith. So, he comes in “gold-fingered,” obviously, a very wealthy man. And we’re told he also came in dressed in fine clothes. The word, “fine” literally translates “bright, shining.” It was used of the robe that the soldiers put on Christ, when they mocked Him. It was also used of the angels’ clothes, who showed up in Acts 10, at the house of Cornelius. It’s probably a reference to the brilliant, white robes often worn by wealthy Jews at that time period.

Notice how James describes the second man. That’s the first one, the rich man. The second one in verse 2: “There also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes,” literally in shabby, filthy clothes. Now, young people, don’t misunderstand. This is not an endorsement of filthiness. Although, I think, as Americans, we do sometimes obsess about cleanliness. You know, three, four showers a day is probably excess. The point, here, that James is making, is that, as a poor man, he would only have one set of clothes. So, these would’ve been the same clothes that he wore all week, possibly at a job, which required a great deal of manual labor. Usually the poorest in the culture get the heaviest and hardest, the most difficult demanding job, in terms of physical labor. A lot of sweat and dirt; there were no clothes washers. He didn’t have a servant to clean them. And he didn’t have a second set to wear. So, he basically came with what he had to wear. They were filthy. Now notice those two men.

But verse 3, we get the members’ sinful response to these two men. First of all, to the rich man, verse 3: “You pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes.” That’s a good translation: “pay special attention.” The idea is, “You look with a special favor on.” You’re excited about this man who has come. Maybe there were whispers around the congregation about, “Look who’s come! Wouldn’t it be a wonderful testimony to the Lord if he really came to faith in Christ?” And you say to this rich man, “You sit here in a good place.” Now in most synagogues in the first century, there were only a few seats. Most of the people stood or sat on the floor. There were special seats of honor, sometimes on a raised platform. Other times, there would be seats near the Scrolls, that special place where the Scrolls, the book of the law was

kept. Those were the seats. And, occasionally, there would be seats around the walls, a sort of bench, a raised bench around the wall. And just under that bench would be a raised lip on which the feet could be rested, a sort of footstool. And so, to this rich man, they say, “Here, take one of the seats that we have; one of these special seats. We only have a few; but, we’re so glad to have you here. Here, take one of these seats.”

“But to the poor man you say, ‘You stand over there. Or you sit down by my footstool.’” To the poor man, who’s either just visiting, or who’s recently come to faith in Christ. Those responsible in the church, and, by the way, the “you,” here, (“You say,”) is plural. It’s not that everybody in the church suddenly spoke up and said, “Here, Here, you take my seat!” The idea is that although only one or two people were speaking to these men, they were expressing the thoughts and desires of the rest of the congregation. This is how everybody thought: “Oh, good. They’re giving him a good seat.” “Oh, yeah, tell that guy to sit over there. He can sit on the floor.” “You say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there, or you sit down by my footstool. You stand, or you can sit here on the floor, next to this raised lip, where I have my feet.’”

Now verse 4, James leaves his illustration, makes a direct application to those first-century Christians, and to each one of us, as well. James essentially says this: “If we treat people differently, based on some external factor, like in this case their clothing, their appearance, then here’s what the Lord, Himself would say to us.” Verse 4, “Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?” You see, when we show partiality, James says, “We are acting like God made us a judge!” But we’re not good judges. We’re judges motivated by evil motives. We’re not making “just” and impartial decisions, like God, the true Judge does. Instead, we’re engaging in the sin of partiality. You see, partiality isn’t just discourteous. It’s sin!

Now, let’s step back for a moment and look at the big picture of what we’ve just learned in these four verses. Don’t misunderstand James’ big point, here. This passage is not just about one kind of partiality, prejudice, or favoritism: that is, catering to the rich and despising the poor. Although it is about that. It’s not just about that. Nor is it only condemning giving better seats in church to certain classes of people. Although it is condemning that. James’ point is much bigger. He is, here, condemning all forms of prejudice and favoritism. We are not to allow anything to change our perspective of people that wouldn’t change God’s perspective. We are to look at people as God looks at them. All those external things that cause us to treat people differently, here, mean absolutely nothing to God. He only sees one great distinction: those who belong to Him, and those who don’t. What James is saying is that we should never treat two

people differently based solely on external factors; when in fact, both of them are made in the image of God.

Understand this. The sin of partiality works both ways. It was a sin for these people to show special favor to the wealthy man simply because of his appearance and wealth. And secondly, it was equally a sin to treat the poor man with contempt because of his appearance and poverty. Both extremes are wrong, because they're based on partial judgment. That's the admonition that James gives us against favoritism, prejudice and partiality.

But why is this sin such a problem? I mean, after all, let's just be honest with ourselves, here. It doesn't seem that serious on the face of it. Well, James anticipates our question. And in the next section, he takes us into the arguments against favoritism, prejudice, and partiality, verses 5 to 13. He lays out here four arguments.

We're just going to look at the first, this week. Very briefly, verse 5: It's inconsistent with God's Sovereign choice.

Listen, my beloved brethren! Did not God choose the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man.

Notice James says, "God has chosen the poor." This does not mean that there's some virtue in poverty. It does not mean that God's chosen every poor person. Nor does it mean that God hasn't chosen any wealthy. First Timothy 6:17 and 18 speak clearly about that reality. What it means is that God has consistently chosen more poor people than he has rich people. Now look at Jesus, Himself. He chose to come into the world in relative poverty. In Luke 9, He says, "The Son of Man" what? "Doesn't have anywhere to lay His head." The fact is, church history proves that God has consistently chosen to draw more poor people to Himself, than rich people.

Jesus, Himself, characterized His ministry in Matthew 11:5. He says, tell John the Baptist that I must be the Messiah, because "*the* POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM." You see, wealth can actually be an impediment to salvation. You remember in Matthew 13, the parable of the soils? One of the soils is a kind of heart that chokes out the message of the Gospel. And Jesus defines that choking out that thing that causes the Gospel to be choked out as the "deceitfulness of riches."

Let's turn, for a moment, to see what else Christ had to say about that in Matthew 19. In Matthew 19, after Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler, He sort of gives us a commentary on it; verse 23.

... Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I say to you: it is easier for a literal camel to go through the literal eye of a needle (in other words, impossible!) than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Now, you have to understand a little bit about the theological climate in which Jesus said this. The Pharisees and first-century leaders of Judaism embraced a sort of a retribution theology which believed that God's pleasure or displeasure was obvious and apparent in our world. So that, if God was pleased with you, then you would be wealthy and blessed in this life. And if God was displeased with you, then you have poverty and trouble. And so, the disciples hear Jesus say that it's hard for a rich man to enter into heaven. In verse 25, they were very astonished. They said, "Well, then, who can be saved? I mean, if the people that we thought were most blessed by God can't get in, where's that leave us?" "And looking at them, Jesus said to them, "With people this is impossible. But with God, all things are possible." In other words, God has the capacity, whether you're poor, or whether you're rich, it's impossible for both. And God intervenes. God acts monargistically, to accomplish His salvation.

Now, turn back to James 2. Why is it that God chooses the poor of this world to come to Christ? Well, remember that God is the One who parcels out wealth or poverty. He's the One who makes that decision. Deuteronomy 8:18, "You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who is giving you the power to make wealth.... Therefore, Job 34:19 records, "God shows no partiality to princes, nor regards the rich above the poor, because they are all the work of His hands." God's unimpressed with poverty, or with wealth. He's the One that ordained that, that worked that out. So why is it that God chooses the poor often? Well, I think He's chosen the poor, because, then, He alone gets the glory.

You see, this intimated in 1 Corinthians. Turn back to 1 Corinthians 1:27.

... 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, [Here's why: verse 29:] so that [for this

purpose] no ... [one] may boast before God. But by His doing, you are in Christ Jesus.... Verse 31, So that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.”

You see, by choosing the poor, God gets the glory. Now, James says, in James 2:5, look how God has blessed the poor, as a result of having chosen them. They are “rich in faith”. That’s a present reality. They are rich for God. And he says, “They are heirs of the kingdom.” This looks ahead to the future kingdom. Christ began His kingdom during His first advent, and He rules now over the hearts of all who follow Him; but when He returns, He will establish the full manifestation of that kingdom. And, James says, “Those whom He has chosen, are heirs of THAT! It’s that kingdom, he says, who, “that He has promised to those who love Him.” And more often than not, God has chosen to accomplish that through the poor of this world.

Christ makes this point powerfully in Luke 16. I want you to turn there, because it cuts across the theology of the Pharisees. And unfortunately, a lot of the thinking in some Christian circles, today. Luke 16, notice verse 13. Jesus says, “No servant can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one, and love the other, or he’ll be devoted to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth!” Now here’s the reason He said that: verse 14. “Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and were scoffing at Him.” Remember, they embraced “material blessing meant God’s blessing, spiritually.” You were closer to God. You were more blessed. So, it’s in that context Jesus tells this familiar story, verse 19:

“Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. And a poor name poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man’s table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.” [Now, so far, the Pharisees are with Him. They would have made the conclusion, immediately, that the rich man, obviously, had the blessing of God, and the poor man had God’s curse and disdain. But Jesus takes their world, and literally turns it upside down. The next verse, verse 22,] “Now the poor man died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom.” [That phrase is used in the Talmud to refer to Heaven. This is ... this is what He’s talking about. “He’s taken to heaven!” He’s got their attention now.] “And the rich man also died and was buried. [And] In Hades, [or in hell,] he lifted up his eyes, being in torment....”

Verse 25, After he's asked for Lazarus to be sent with water, Abraham replies to the rich man, "... Child, remember that during your life, you received your good things, and likewise, Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony."

You know what Jesus is teaching? Your state in this life is no indication of what your state in the life will come to come will be. Absolutely rocked their world! God has often chosen the poor, even a beggar, with dogs licking his sores.

Now, it's in that context (go back to James 2), that James says, "This is what God has chosen." Verse 6, "But you have dishonored the poor man." God has chosen to bestow great honor on the poor. And so it's utterly inconsistent for us, as followers of Christ, to dishonor them, to mistreat them because of external differences. I mean, look at the pattern of Christ. During His earthly ministry, he treated all who came to Him the same, whether it was Nicodemus, a wealthy Jewish leader, or whether it was a common beggar, like Bartimaeus.

Now as you look at this passage, there are dozens of legitimate applications. And my prayer is that the Holy Spirit would take the Word and examine your heart carefully with it. I know your conscience has been rebuked, today, as mine was, as I studied this passage, because we're all guilty of this in some way. This is part of fallen humanness. Are you "just" in how you treat people? Do you look at people as God looks at them? All of them, no matter how unlike you, are made in the image of God, and deserve to be taken infinitely seriously. Do you show partiality on the basis of anything? All of those are questions that we need to ask, out of the flow of this passage.

But the primary application of this passage is the one James makes: "life in the church." One commentator has written:

"What James has in mind is much weightier than merely how our modern church ushers escort visitors to their seats. 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. The passage calls us to be blind to economic differences, in how we offer our ministries. The poor person is as worthy of our discipling and pastoral care and love as the person who has the means to rescue our church from its budget crisis."

John MacArthur, in his commentary writes,

Tragically, many otherwise biblical and faithful churches today do not treat all their members the same. Frequently, those who are of a different ethnic background, race, or financial standing are not fully welcomed into fellowship. That ought not to be! It not only is a transgression of God's divine law; but it is a mockery of His divine character.

Peter learned this lesson. As I close, turn with me to Acts 10. I love this story, because it's ... it's a perfect illustration of this reality. In Acts 10, of course, Peter is, it's before supper. He finds himself on the rooftop of a home in Joppa. And God gives him a vision with a number of unclean animals. And He tells him to rise and eat. And Peter can't bring himself to do this. And God says, "Don't ever call what I have cleansed 'unclean.'" Peter wakes up, sort of pondering what all this means. And suddenly there's a knock at the door. And it's the servants of Cornelius. And Peter goes with them. And God uses Peter to bring this Gentile, and those with him to faith. But notice what Peter says in verse 34. He gets there. "And opening his mouth, Peter said: 'I get it! I understand! I most certainly understand now, that God is not one to show partiality! He's not just interested in the Jews, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.'"

And may he be welcome in our church, and in our lives, and in our hearts, as well.

Let's pray together.

Father, our consciences smite us, this morning, with what we've heard from this passage. We are so prone to sinfulness in this area, and in so many different ways. Father, forgive us. Help us to remember Your holy, just character, that there is no partiality with You. You are unswayed by external factors. Father, help us to be the same. Help us to demonstrate the love of Christ to all of those who come across our path, to respect them as creatures made in Your image, who will someday stand before You, as we will.

We pray in Jesus' Name. Amen

