

James 2:1-13, No. 7
November 29, 2015
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

We begin a new section of James with another of his more than 50 imperatives that punctuate his short letter. Now the subject is *partiality*, treating people differently depending on their social class or wealth. We call this “respect of persons” or “favoritism.” [Motyer, 80] James has just written about how true religion demonstrates itself in care for widows and orphans. Perhaps that thought prompted him to write the next section, though widows and orphans are not mentioned and are not specifically the poor James now writes about.

Text Comment

- v.1 Jesus is mentioned only twice in the letter, but honor is certainly paid to him with the title James bestows on his elder brother, “the Lord of glory,” a title we find elsewhere in the New Testament, for example in 1 Cor. 2:8. It can be understood in different ways but it definitely contributes to the NT witness to the deity of Jesus Christ.
- v.4 I’ll return to this shortly, but don’t imagine that this is some kind of exaggeration on James’ part. Precisely this kind of public distinction between the rich and the poor was a commonplace of life in those days and in saying this James was requiring his Christian readers to break ranks with their culture in a way likely to bring real offense. But to behave as if such distinctions of class and wealth mattered was to abandon the gospel ground and set one’s feet firmly back in the world.

Now James is not saying that proper respect ought not to be granted to certain people and demonstrated in certain outward ways. The Bible shows us this being done properly in many cases: respect for the king, for officers of his government, for older men and women, and so on. It is not such demonstrations of respect that is being condemned but favoritism and partiality. [Motyer, 82]

- v.5 It was, remember, part of the scandal of the Lord’s own ministry that the poor “heard him gladly” while the upper echelons of society were largely immune to his appeal and were often offended by the fact that he associated so readily with what they regarded as the dregs of society. He didn’t limit his ministry to the poor, but they got more of his time and attention than the rich and powerful did. [Tasker, 58-59] James’ point is obvious and simple: if the Lord regards people as fundamentally the same and is indifferent to worldly and temporary distinctions between them, his people ought to be as well.
- v.7 It is often assumed that this statement indicates that this was precisely the problem that these Christians were facing: being poor themselves they found themselves at the mercy of the rich. It is certainly possible, though it is clear enough that there were those among them who had status or wealth sufficient to tempt them to look down on those less fortunate than themselves. In any case, the point is obvious: it hardly makes sense to treat with special honor a class of people more likely to be your enemies than your friends!

That the rich blaspheme the Lord's name is not, of course, a fixed law. There have always been godly men and women among the well-to-do, but it was not a secret in those days and has not been a secret since that it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a poor who is made so much more easily conscious of his own need, of the injustice of human life, and of his dependence upon God to change his circumstances.

- v.9 To call the law of God the *royal* law is to acknowledge that it is the law *of a King!* In this way James draws attention to its authority over our lives. To refer to it here is a reminder that the treatment of the poor with dignity, respect, and generosity was not a new obligation of God's people. It had always been their calling. As far back as Leviticus 19:15 we read:

“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.”

And, of course, that was simply a particular application of the general law, cited by James here, and found for the first time in the same chapter of Leviticus (19:18): “you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

And throughout the Old Testament we have the same indifference to status in the treatment of others as both the practice of God and the behavior of a godly man. In Job 34:18-19 we read of God himself that he “says to a king, ‘Worthless one,’ and to nobles, ‘wicked man,’ who shows no partiality to princes, nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands.”

- v.11 The Lord Jesus, as you remember, made the same point in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:19) and so did the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3 and 5. Obedience that picks and chooses among the laws to be obeyed is no obedience at all. To put it bluntly, far from perfect obedience to all the commandments of God is counted in the Bible as real obedience because the desire to obey counts for so much with God. Punctilious obedience to a few commandments together with utter indifference to others is throughout the Bible regarded as disobedience pure and simple. This was the fatal error of Israel through so much of her history and, in particular, of the Pharisees during Jesus' day. As one commentator helpfully puts the principle:

“When we see the crescent moon we say, ‘There's the moon’ because the whole is there even though we can see only a part. In the same way the whole law of God is represented in every individual precept. Or, to put it another way, the law is not like a heap of stones but like a sheet of glass. We could take one stone from a heap and leave the heap still intact; but when we throw a brick through a window, it strikes only one place but it fragments the whole. The law of God is like the glass: a break at one point cannot be contained; the cracking...spreads over the entire area.” [Motyer, 99]

Once again we have the law of God described as “the law of liberty,” as before in 1:25. The phrase indicates both that we *can* keep the law because Christ enables us, we are free in that way; *and* it is through obedience to that law that we become genuinely free, that is, we come into our own as human beings and find true freedom from the oppressive forces of life in this sinful world.

- v.13 You recognize this too as a teaching of the Lord Jesus, in fact a teaching that comes in a variety of forms, so important was it to him. Among his beatitudes at the opening of the Sermon on the Mount is this one: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” [Matt. 5:7] But later in that same sermon we have the same principle applied in a different way. “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” [6:14-15] And, of course, a still more exact parallel to James’ remark here is another statement in that same Sermon (7:2): “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” Everywhere in the Bible, true faith in Christ and in salvation by the grace of God is demonstrated in life by a gracious spirit toward others. How can a man who understands that his great debt has been paid in full by the Lord Jesus then treat others without grace and mercy himself, as if they must *deserve* his good will? Think of the statement of Paul in 2 Cor. 8:9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich.” That gracious condescension on God’s part we are taught in many ways in the Bible is to become the living principle of our lives. Thus far the Word of God.

We know from the Gospels that there was a definite stratification of Jewish social life, with the upper classes retaining most of the wealth and looking down on those who were poor. The fact that the Lord’s compassion for and interest in the poor was an offense to them is some powerful evidence that, while they no doubt admitted some responsibility to care for the poor – the Law of Moses made that obligation clear – their heart was not in it. And it was not simply the financially poor they looked down on. People in certain trades, people who lived what they regarded as disreputable lives, and people with certain forms of illness were in many ways non-persons among the Jews during the time of the Lord’s ministry.

And what was true among the Jews was even more the case in Greco-Roman culture generally. High social status or social rank was immensely important to the Romans. Such people got the front seats at shows by right; the clothes they wore were a symbol of their status, and when the state distributed money, food, or wine, they were entitled to a larger share, even though they had less need. Separate courts tried cases having to do with the upper or lower classes, the upper classes could not be sued by their social inferiors, and they received more lenient punishment if convicted of a crime. At dinner parties the seating was arranged by class. If a poorer client was invited to such a party, primarily to witness his patron’s wealth and glory – usually not out of genuine friendship – he could expect to be the butt of jokes and to receive food and wine that was obviously inferior to that being served to the honored guests. All of this was considered both normal and proper in the Roman world.

But it went deeper even than these behaviors by which partiality was shown to those of higher social status or to the wealthy. The rich genuinely despised the poor. Classical literature is full of upper-class sneers at the laziness and poverty of the poor. Cicero, for example, speaks with contempt for “craftsmen, petty shopkeepers, and all that filth of the cities.” [*Pro Flacco*, 18] Remember, with those words he was describing an immense portion of the population of the imperial world. Roman nobles thought that poverty was itself dishonorable and they felt little sympathy for the plight of the poor. On a wall at Pompeii one man wrote: “I hate poor people. If anyone wants something for nothing, he’s a fool. Let him pay up and he’ll get it.” Another Roman wrote, “To certain people I shall not give, even though there is need, because there will still be need even if I give.” [The above in J. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 191-193] Remember, huge numbers of people in the Roman world were slaves, and most of them belonged to the lower echelons of society.

But don’t suppose that this partiality or favoritism was, therefore, a problem just for early Christianity. Let me give you but one illustration of how the problem of partiality has raised its head in Christian practice through the years, of how the church has always struggled to be true to both the law of God and the principle of salvation by grace alone. This from a situation far nearer our own time and concerning a figure we usually think of in largely heroic terms.

Churches that were state churches rarely managed to put James’ teaching here into practice. Jonathan Edwards’ church in Northampton, Massachusetts in the 1730s (remember, this was the time of the Great Awakening, many had experienced God’s salvation in wonderful power) was in the process of building a new meetinghouse. But seating in New England sanctuaries, as it had been back in England, was assigned by status, so a new seating plan had to be drawn up by the town’s “seating committee.”

“The town could not agree on whether to continue the practices of seating men on one side and women on the other (with young people in the balcony) or to seat people on the main floor by families. After much wrangling they decided to do both. The new meetinghouse included thirty-five box-shaped pews around the periphery, some of which were occupied by family units. The rest of the seating continued the traditional separation by gender, women on the opposite side of the aisle from their husbands. Seating by family was more comfortable.... It also could accentuate family rivalries when one family was seated more prominently than a near rival. That was particularly so when the town...decided to make wealth the primary criterion in determining seating, to consider age secondarily, and to consider ‘men’s usefulness,’ as in public service [still] to a lesser degree. Previously, age had been the primary consideration and wealth secondary.

Edwards’ biographer continues:

“Because New Englanders prided themselves on regulating their worship on the Bible alone, one might think that they would have taken more to heart the biblical condemnation of those who ‘love the uppermost [seats] at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogue’ (Matthew 23:6). That they ignored this instruction reminds us how essentially hierarchical their social assumptions were. Not to honor social distinctions,

even in church, was to them as unthinkable as it would be today for persons in the military not to honor differences in rank.”

Although Edwards himself protested against the spirit of this wrangling and preached against those who “seek after a high seat in God’s house above seeking eminent holiness,” he also took for granted that social hierarchies were God’s provision for good order. [Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 186]

Many factors contribute to the difficulties the church has long had to put James’ instructions here into practice. First there is the love of money – a temptation for us all - that draws men to the wealthy like moths to a flame. Then there are the cultural patterns that – given the tendencies of the sinful human heart – almost invariably favor the wealthy and the powerful and teach us to look up to them and to aspire to be like them. Then there is the inevitable desire that the church should profit from the patronage and generosity of the wealthy and the powerful.

I’m reading at present an immense new study of the problem created by the legal recognition and then imperial protection and even endorsement of Christianity from the 4th century onwards. Peter Brown, the Princeton professor of history is one of our finest scholars of the early church. His biography of Augustine, written when Brown was a young man, is still regarded as the finest introduction to the life of the great church father. Brown has entitled this book *Through the Eye of a Needle*, a reference, of course, to the Lord’s remark about it being harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of needle. In the first few centuries after Pentecost it became the nearly universal expectation that when a wealthy person became a Christian he or she would divest himself or herself of that wealth: give it to the church or to the poor. *And that is what many wealthy converts did!* Hard as this is for us to imagine, they gave it all away. But when the church was formally recognized and when huge numbers of Roman citizens entered the church because it was now viewed with favor by the government, the church was faced with the problem of a large number of wealthy converts who did not surrender their wealth but began to support the work of the church *out of their wealth* or, in some cases, did not. The church accommodated herself to wealthy members and, as Brown points out, there was nothing wrong in that *per se*. Abraham was and remained a wealthy man by the blessing of God. So was Job; so was David. The Lord was buried in an expensive tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, one of his followers. It is clear from the letters of Paul that there were wealthy men and women in the churches he had founded. There were slaves, but there were slave holders as well.

But the church as a whole began in this way to acquire great wealth in part because it has among its number many well-to-do, if not very wealthy people. And so the situation we know still today was born. Fund-raising within the church became common, what we would nowadays call a capital campaign, designed to raise money for this or that, a new church building, or an orphanage, or a hospital. In a thousand ways the church began to make use, often very happy and holy use, of the wealth of its members. One example of this particularly interested me. Augustine was Bishop of Hippo for thirty five years and in addition to everything else that he did – the books he wrote, the daily pastoral ministry he conducted – he preached: some 6,000 sermons over those thirty-five years. And those sermons are one of the principle treasures the church possesses from the patristic period. Racy, practical, exceedingly rich both theologically and

pastorally, an almost perfect example of the preacher's art, they are a priceless inheritance of early Christianity. In reading Augustine's sermons – and you can now read them in fine new translations that wonderfully capture the great preacher's art and power – you know that in most cases you are hearing Augustine's living voice. They were not carefully edited later to make them more polished, more suitable for publication. And do you know why that is? Because rich members of his congregation in Hippo themselves paid to have skilled secretaries take down the sermons in shorthand as the words came from his lips. At least with some of these sermons, the ones that were not too severely cut down by medieval copyists who were only interested in Augustine's theology, not in Augustine's Africa, or his parishioners, or the specific issues of congregational life he addressed, I say, at least with some of these sermons we can hear Augustine almost as if on a tape recording. [Brown, 339] Rich people have done wonderful things for the Christian church through the ages. Powerful people likewise. Martin Luther would have been executed near the very beginning of what became the Reformation, with unpredictable results or consequences, had he not had the patronage and protection of Friederich the Wise, the ruler of Luther's home state of Saxony. So wealth and privilege have been the instruments of gospel advance for many centuries.

But no one reading the Bible or observing human life could doubt the temptation it posed to the church to have both wealthy and poor in the same congregations, or to form congregations that reflected the population of their neighborhoods, some more wealthy or very wealthy, some very poor.

Still, at its best, the church realized that both the Law of God and the example of Jesus Christ required Christians to be kind and generous to the poor, to be advocates for their dignity, and to treat them as in every way equal so far as everything truly important was concerned. They knew how the Lord Jesus had concentrated his ministry among the outcasts and the despised of his own society, they knew how the Bible – and Jesus himself – often used the very term “poor” as a metaphor for the Christian, they knew very well how explicitly the Bible in its entirety forbade partiality based on class or wealth, and they knew that to judge a person's value or importance by such worldly measures was to betray both the grace of God and the message of the gospel. Paul had taught them that the love of money was the root of all evil and they knew very well that that the Lord Jesus had made a point of teaching them to lay up their treasure in heaven not on earth. The whole weight of biblical ethical teaching as well as the internal logic of the gospel required them both to devalue the importance of money or power as the measure of one's life and to value the importance of generosity and kindness to the poor and needy. Indeed, the Lord had made a point of saying that he would judge a person's life on the great day by whether he or she had fed and clothed the poor.

It was not a case, it was never a case of *earning one's way to heaven by generosity to the poor*. That is impossible and the very idea that it might be done is a profound betrayal of the cross of Jesus Christ. No, the motivation was far deeper, purer, and more honest than that. It was the fundamental recognition that we are all poor ourselves, that God was exceedingly generous to us in our great need, and that true faith in him and love for him, *in the nature of the case*, will and must express itself in behavior of the same kind: in generosity of the same kind and in a willingness to love someone who has very little to give us in return. Such was God's love for us!

The church at its best demonstrated these convictions in dramatic and beautiful ways. Callistus, a former slave, became Bishop of Rome in the year 220. Some years earlier as a pagan slave, Callistus had been imprisoned for theft. And now he was leader of one of the most important churches in Christendom. As bishop Callistus allowed the marriage of patrician girls to freedman, that is, to former slaves, something forbidden by Roman law. We don't know whether that contributed to his martyrdom, but it is evidence that the church knew very well that it was the spiritual quality of a man that was his recommendation for office or for marriage, not his wealth or his social status. Or, better, consider this.

The first great poet of the Christian faith, not as a hymn-writer but a writer of poems to be read and recited as literature, and so the spiritual father of Dante, John Milton, William Cowper, and so many others, was Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, born into a Christian family in Roman Spain in A.D. 348. He had a distinguished career in the imperial government but then retired to devote himself entirely to writing poetry. Well educated in the literature of the Greco-Roman world, his were poems in a high register. They compare favorably to other poetry of the classical period.

In one of his books of poems, entitled *Carmen Martyribus* (A Song to the Martyrs) Prudentius tells the story of Lawrence, a deacon in the Church of Rome in the middle of the 3rd century – a century before Prudentius was born – who suffered martyrdom during the persecution under Emperor Valerian, probably in A.D. 258. Lawrence, the most senior deacon, was in charge of the church's treasury. The prefect of the city, who had heard that the Lord's Supper was served in vessels of gold and silver illuminated by golden candlesticks, ordered Lawrence to surrender the church's gold and silver to him. To which Lawrence replied:

“Our church is rich.
I deny it not.
Much wealth and gold it has
No one in the world has more.”

Those lines sound much better in their original Latin than in English translation. Lawrence secured time from the prefect to collect the church's wealth – three days – and spent those days going about the city gathering the sick and the poor. The people he collected included a man with two eyeless sockets, a cripple with a broken knee, a one-legged man, a person with one leg shorter than the other, and others with serious infirmities of one sort or another. He wrote down their names and lined them up inside the main entrance of the church. Only then did he seek out the prefect to bring him to the church. When the government officer entered the door of the church, expecting of course to see tables laden with expensive cups and plates and candlesticks, Lawrence pointed to the ragged company and said, “There are the church's riches, take them.” Enraged at what he took to be mockery, the prefect ordered Lawrence's execution. [Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Worship*, 212-215, 224-226]

That, I think, is a biblical principle. One avoids the temptation – whether as an individual Christian or as a church – to pay attention to wealth and status by pushing hard in the opposite direction, by making a point of ignoring such considerations and concentrating on ministry to the poor. When you make the poor the heroes of your church, the representative Christians, you

protect yourselves from the otherwise irresistible temptation to forget everything you know as a Christian and both envy the rich and show partiality toward them.

Now, let's bring James' wisdom home. We are Presbyterians. We have been through much of our history a middle-class and upper middle-class church. We're a church with quite a bit of money. Years ago I came across a cute little piece that was designed to help us see how the various denominations all had something to be said on their behalf and how they all contributed something important to the church's whole ministry. It went this way, in each case talking about the gospel.

If we could just make it beautiful like the Episcopalians do. If we could just shout it like the Pentecostals do. If we could just spread it like the Baptists do. If we could just adorn it with beautiful anthems as the Lutherans do. And on and on it went.

Do you know what was said about the Presbyterians? It was this: "If we could just pay for it like the Presbyterians do!" What that means, of course, is that we are perhaps particularly subject to the temptations that James is here warning us against. We do not have much poverty in our church. We've never had much poverty in our church. And we need, therefore, to do what the ancient Christians did and set our faces toward the poor and the needy.

It isn't, of course, always financial need that should elicit our generous concern and help, though perhaps it is more often than not. C.S. Lewis in the 1940s, when still at Oxford, gave lessons to a war evacuee with severe learning disabilities, a lad with a mental age of about eight. A great man of letters, one of the most highly educated men of the world of that day, fluent in languages both ancient and modern, Lewis made flash cards of letters and words gave him daily lessons in how to read. [In C. Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer*, 51n] We see a stoop in what Lewis did. I'm sure he would say there was no stoop at all. One of God's creatures was helping another; a Christian was practicing his faith in the grace of God and the humble service of Jesus Christ on his behalf.

At the time, it can seem uncomfortable, unnatural, even hard work. Standing back to see it for what it is, who of us does not want there to be a great deal of *that* in our Christian lives!