
“The Sin Of Partiality”

JAMES 2:1-7

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A church that values relevance over Truth will eventually find itself with neither.

Isn't it tempting to play nice with people you think you can curry favor? Especially if that person, or that group of people have resources and influence and can make life easier for you? It seems the first church responded to their difficulties of being scattered throughout the Roman world and being harassed by nearly everyone by trying to win the favor of wealthy people. In today's passage James addressed the all-too-common problem of the sin of partiality. The church compromised its values, disregarded the Word of God, and gave special treatment to rich people. Most likely they were responding to the pain of being rejected and treated as irrelevant in their communities. Perhaps they thought giving the rich what the rich wanted would earn some acceptance within the community. The problem is that a church that values relevance over Truth will eventually find itself with neither. James exhorts the church to show no partiality as you hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, a pastor friend told me a story of a wealthy widow who went to see the pastor of the church in middle of her community. She went to offer him a large sum of money, hundreds of thousands if not a couple mill, to pay off their church's new building project. The pastor was obviously pretty excited. Just as he was leaning forward and picking his chin up off the floor, she said, "There is, however, one condition. I want to honor my late husband with his money. My husband's name goes on the building." The pastor squirmed in his seat for a little while before he reluctantly declined. "The only name going on one of our buildings is the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." With that the woman picked up her purse and walked out of his office, taking her offer with her.

This story has played out in the history of the church a million times in a million different ways. Unfortunately, not every pastor and not every church does the right thing like this one did. Perhaps they should have paid more attention to today's passage in James 2 where James exhorts the church to stop giving preferential treatment to the rich and influential.

I imagine the leadership board at that church had a rather lengthy discussion and they probably sought any loophole they could discover to justify putting her husband's name on the building. But

they held their ground. A few days later, the woman walked back into the pastor's office and without a word laid a check on his desk, no strings attached.

I wish every story took a turn like that, but you and I know they don't. Even if his story didn't, he'd still have been right to do what he did. Took a lot of guts to hold the faith like that. James wants you and me to do the same. Let's read James 2:1-7.

James 2:1-7

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

With as much space as James devotes to this idea of favoritism toward the rich and some of the verbiage, he uses suggests this is more than hypothetical. James was likely aware that this was taking place. This isn't just a general pastoral warning; it was a pastoral rebuke of their sin of partiality. Ironically, as we've read in this passage, the church being persecuted by rich people responded to their persecution by trying to win favor with the very ones who hated them. Not only is it sin, it's also foolish.

Let's read **verse 1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.** James begins with a phrase that fosters a sense of equality between him and the audience, his scattered church. James calls them **my brothers**. He urges them to **show no partiality**.

The partiality James is specifically addressing is treating some people in the church differently than others; which is inconsistent with a genuine faith in the One who came to break down man-made barriers. Because God is an impartial God, His people are called to be impartial people. The church ought to be a place where rich and poor people should find acceptance in **the faith**.

IMPARTIALITY DOES NOT MEAN ABANDONMENT OF DISCERNMENT

This implies our impartiality is not to be stretched to mean we accept without any discrimination or discernment the various ideas, philosophies, and lifestyles of the world. Rather, it means we invite and accept all people to embrace our faith. We invite people to accept the Truth of the Gospel and reject the world's lies. This is what James means when he says **as you hold the faith**.

James' primary concern here is protecting the faith, not protecting diversity of ideas. James is telling us that it is inconsistent with genuine faith to act with partiality toward rich people at the expense of poor people. He is not telling us to abandon discernment and accept the ideologies of the world.

This is an important distinction because we *are* called to show partiality, discrimination, discernment, & right judgment when it comes to the faith. There's only one truth. There's only one way to the

Father. James makes it explicit, **the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory**. To hold the faith means to uphold the Word of God.

TITLES, NOT NAMES

James said our faith is in the **Lord Jesus Christ**. **Lord** and **Christ** are titles, not names for Jesus. James is reminding us of who Jesus is, and of to whom we belong. He is our sovereign master, king, Lord, & Christ. Faith in Him must and will change how we live and how we treat other people. If our faith does not change us, we do not have genuine faith. This becomes part of the tests of our faith that James wrote of in chapter 1. How we respond to people, rich and poor, tests our faith.

Evidently, one of the primary temptations to show partiality is favoritism toward rich people. We get it, right?! Someone drives a fancy car, lives in a fancy house, wears fancy clothes, wields a little power and influence, the world says they deserve VIP treatment.

JAMES 2:2-4

Let's look at **verses 2-4**. **For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?**

James describes a man with an ostentatious display of wealth. He is **wearing a gold ring**, literally meaning "gold fingered." In addition to his dazzling fingers, he wore **fine clothing**. There's nothing new under the sun. Put some expensive jewelry on your fingers, wrists, and neck and wear flashy clothing, and people will know you've got money. And with that money will come influence, favor, and opportunity! It's not surprising that the world fawns over these people and sucks up to them, but it's tragic when this happens in the church.

A NOTE ABOUT RICHES

A brief note about riches. There is nothing wrong with being wealthy as long as you are rich toward God. Jesus made that clear with the parable of the man who built larger barns. It is when we use our wealth to honor ourselves, as this man James describes, that we fail the test of riches. The reality is that if we put most of us in a room with a representation of the rest of human history, we would be the rich in the room. Let's use our riches for His Kingdom!

James seems to be describing an instance in which simultaneously two men arrive as visitors to the **[their] gathering**. Evidently, they've already done announcements and they're into the first song because seats are sparse. The lead usher, perhaps even one of the elders greets both men and looking at the two men decides to give the good seat to the rich man and humiliate the poor by offering a seat on the floor.

A DESIRE TO GET ON THEIR GOOD SIDE

What do you suppose motivates this partiality toward the rich? What are the **evil thoughts** that cause people to **become judges** as James says in verse 4? Is it not a desire to get on their good side? Is it not to become at least the passive recipients of some of the benefits of their influence? Whether that be as overt as getting some of their money or as subtle as being associated with them by proximity?

The world says it's good to butter up a person of greater influence. It says you should endear yourself to them, be seen with them, get their endorsement. One way of achieving that is by showing special honor to them in public. Important people love to feel important. They love the recognition. When you recognize them, you're inflating their ego. They like to have people around who inflate their ego. Perhaps the church rationalized sucking up to the rich by saying, "Imagine what this person can do for the church with that influence and all that money!"

FILTHY CLOTHING

The **poor man in shabby clothing** didn't get this same response, though. The poor are often disregarded. The way James describes the poor man makes it very uncomfortable for the reader. He said this poor man showed up to church, to church!, in "filthy" clothing; they were visibly tattered & worn, and probably reeked.

The church representative tells the poor man, **"You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet."** In other words, you can stay but don't get in the way. Don't be seen. We can't have word getting out that we let just anybody in here. We've already gotten a reputation of being weirdos. This sends the message to the poor, "Your kind isn't welcome here." Honestly, they probably didn't think it would hurt if the world got the message, too. Perhaps they'd come to realize we're not all that different from them. Maybe, we can be *more relevant* if we get in with the rich crowd and keep the poor out.

But the church is called to be radically different from the world! This is no a place to honor as the world honors. This is a place to honor as God honors, and God honors the poor. God honors the outcast and those who love God will do the same. To be clear, James is not calling for special treatment of the poor over the rich, but rather to treat everyone with dignity and respect. In treating poor people and rich people with dignity, we are in effect giving the poor uncommon dignity.

UNCOMMON DIGNITY

James called for *uncommon dignity* because what he saw was *common partiality*. He said, **have you not then made distinctions among yourselves?** Douglas Moo points out that James had already used this word translated **distinctions** here, in 1:6 where it is translated "divided." There James was referring to the double-minded, or divided, man who lacks faith. The people acted just the same way they thought, with division. In other words, they acted without integrity. They were hypocrites.

James pulls no punches when it comes to addressing the sin of partiality. These are **evil thoughts**. It probably does not surprise you to hear that this still happens. A woman at a previous ministry told my wife that I was attracting the "wrong" kind of people. By that she meant poor people. The crowd had changed from mostly upper-middle class to an economically diverse congregation. She didn't approve. They take up resources and don't bring much to the offering plate. Some of them stunk when they came to church, and they didn't dress very well. They taint the reputation of the church. They make us look strange. I can't bring my rich friends here around these people. These are the things that few people say out loud, but they are nevertheless evil thoughts.

JAMES 2:5-6a

James encouraged the church to be people who see the image of God in everyone and treat all people with dignity and respect. A church that fails in this regard, fails to think like God. Let's continue in **verses 5 and 6 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? 6a But you have dishonored the poor man.** James is ramping up the rhetoric here when he says **Listen, my beloved brothers**. He's going to drive the point home.

God has a way of thinking and honoring people that is opposite the world. God **has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.** God has chosen the ones who would be least likely to think they earned it themselves. The poor recognize their need. Why does He do this? So that His glory will be magnified in the nations!

What worldly king wouldn't choose the wealthy and beautiful and influential? What worldly king wouldn't search out the nations and draw in the best and brightest and most noble? Every king would do that! There's no glory in that. Our God chose the least, the poor, the ignoble, the ones who get picked last on the playground so that the whole world will know how great is our God! And how merciful is our King!

GOD HONORS THE POOR

God honors the poor man by choosing him to be rich in faith and He gives him the kingdom! God welcomes the poor man with open arms. God enriches him with heavenly gifts. God bestows upon the poor man great honor! How sad is it then, for James to conclude **But you have dishonored the poor man?** Believers who have been born of God have been given His Holy Spirit and we should expect that over time we will begin to think more and more like our God who loves the poor man.

Don't misunderstand, we love the rich just as we love all humanity. God loved David and David was quite wealthy. As was Abraham. As was Zacchaeus. Speaking of Zacchaeus, consider what God did in this rich man's heart. When Zacchaeus was born again, he had a total change of heart and he repented of swindling people and vowed to return what he stole, four times over.

He took advantage of people, and no doubt especially the poor who were most vulnerable to this sort of scheme, but his new nature was evidenced by a new concern for the poor. Zacchaeus, in his new nature as a child of God, heir of the Kingdom of God, realized what James wanted the church to realize, all heirs of the kingdom share in the honor of the kingdom.

JAMES 2:6b-7

How sad for supposed heirs of the kingdom to dishonor those whom God has chosen to honor. Sad may not be strong enough of a word; how sinful to dishonor the honored citizens of God's kingdom. Not only sad, not only sinful, but James continues by showing us how foolish it is. **Verse 6b Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?**

Throughout history it is generally the rich who have oppressed the poor. The rich are powerful, and the poor are vulnerable. Praise the Lord there is going to be a great reversal in the Kingdom of God where the first will be last and the last first. Until then, however, this is reality. The rich people of James' day knew how to work the system for their benefit, and allegiance with them was costly. How foolish of the church to try to get in their good graces for the sake of being accepted by them!

The rich in the world have the means, the access, and the leverage to take advantage of Christians around the world. So, James asks the obvious question: **Are not the rich the ones who oppress you?** Why, then, would the church pander to them? Why would the church honor those who hate them, oppress them, abuse them, sue them, and try to destroy them?

I can imagine the church leadership reasoning along these lines, "If they could just get to know us, perhaps they'd like us. If they could see how nice and loving we are, they'd stop harassing us. If we give them what they want – recognition, prominence, influence – then perhaps they'd use their

riches for our good. We could get in good with these people and then our lives would be easier.”
Imagine what they could do for the church!

NOTHING HAS CHANGED

Nothing has changed. A church wants to win some points with the culture, so they pander to its agenda. Inevitably, though, they don't go far enough. They don't esteem highly enough. They don't shout loudly enough. They don't say it clearly enough. They don't keep up with the changing trends. Then they get pressured to capitulate or they get cancelled.

You're only useful to the influential, and you're only in the good graces of the culture, as long as you defer to their preferences and submit to their never-ending demands. The first church tried to woo the lost world into liking them by giving rich people places of prominence in their gatherings. Rather than holding tight to the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, they attempted to alleviate their own suffering by adapting to the lost world around them. They attempted to gain and maintain relevancy by adopting the values of the world. They got in bed with the people who **blaspheme the honorable name by which [they] were called** - the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

Church, the temptation to be liked by the world is nothing new. No one wants to be disliked. No one wants to be hated. No one wants to be shamed and humiliated by their co-workers, family, friends, & neighbors. But it's a problem when our response is to capitulate to people who blaspheme the name of our Lord. When we bow down to culture to score relevancy points, we're no different than the church who gave the good seats to the rich man with gold on his fingers. In the end the motivation is the same – a desire to be accepted by the world.

WHY BEGIN THIS WAY?

James concluded his introduction to the letter with a statement about true religion, “religion that is pure and undefiled before God.” That religion is religion characterized by control of the tongue, care for the poor, and keeping oneself unstained by the world. Then James moves into the rest of the letter following that road map. He's going to address the care for the poor, he's going to address the tongue, and he's going to address the preservation of the purity of the church. So why begin the main body of the letter with the discussion of playing favorites with the rich? Who cares where someone sits in worship? It seems trivial.

Here's why I believe James began there: playing favorites with the rich hits all three points and it hits hard right out of the gate. The sin of partiality toward the rich neglects, rather than cares for, the poor. The sin of partiality is expressed in the words we say, the discriminating words that come from our divided hearts. And the sin of partiality stains our faith because it works just like the world works. I want to spend the rest of my time addressing this last point.

The sin of partiality stains our religion with pragmatism, sentimentalism, and emotionalism. It looks at how the world defers to the rich and influential and it ascribes honor to them in hopes that in turn some of that influence and maybe some of those riches will come back to the church. It insists, “Don't do or say anything that might upset the influencers; you don't want to be cancelled do you?”

KIND, NICE, & PLEASANT

This might have an *appearance of godliness* and *wisdom*— it appears kind & nice & pleasant. Which is why some people confuse it with love. Some people take Ephesians 4:15 out of context, where Paul says “speaking the truth in love,” and they imagine that in order to speak the truth in love, we can't say

or do anything that might offend or hurt someone's feelings. If it feels hard or if it offends, it must not be loving.

Like I said, this is taking Ephesians 4:15 out of context. Those who do, ignore the fact that Paul was warning the church about false teaching, human cunning, and deceitful schemes. Paul was saying that Jesus gave to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds (what we call pastors) – all men charged with speaking the Truth to the church to equip the saints for the work of ministry so that we would all mature in unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God and no longer be tossed around by every wind of doctrine. “Rather, speaking the truth in love,” Paul said, “we are to grow up into Him who is the head, into Christ.” That’s the context.

THE WAR FOR TRUTH

There’s a war raging in the world – a war for truth. It is, therefore, the least loving thing we can do to honor people who blaspheme the name of the Lord Jesus Christ with their deceitful schemes and winds of doctrine and worldly “wisdom.” In fact, it’s the *most selfish* thing we can do to engage in the sin of partiality to curry favor with people we think might make us more relevant and refuse to tell them hard truths for fear of offending. To affirm, or even to refuse to confront, the ideologies and lifestyles of people who blaspheme Jesus’ honorable name is neither loving nor faithful.

We are short-sighted if we fail to translate the principle as well as the command James sets before us here. We’re foolish if we think the main point is where we seat people in worship.

No, James is addressing a deeper problem in the church, a problem manifest in how they treated rich people and poor people, but not limited to that. I agree with Kent Hughes who identified their problem, “God’s word did not triumph over culture.”

GOD’S WORD DID NOT TRIUMPH OVER CULTURE

God’s Word did not triumph over culture! God’s people looked at the culture and said, “Let’s be like them so they will like us. Let’s compromise the Word so we can be relevant to the world.” It’s been said, whatever you win them with, you have to keep them with. You win people with flattery, you have to keep flattering. But if you win them with the truth of the Word, you keep them with the truth of the Word. This leaves us with a simple question, church. Does the word of God triumph over culture here? And more pointedly, does the Word of God triumph over culture in your life personally? When the Word contradicts the world, which one wins in your life?

A church that values relevance over Truth will eventually find itself with neither. This is something we must diligently guard against because the church has been entrusted with the proclamation of the Gospel. There is perhaps no greater proclamation of the Gospel than observance of the Lord’s Supper. Paul said 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 we need to examine ourselves before receiving communion. As we transition to the Lord’s Supper, let’s examine our hearts. Does the Word of God triumph over culture in your life?

COULD IT HAPPEN TO ME?

This question should humble us. It should cause us to get low before the Lord and say, if it could happen in the first church, it could happen to me. If they could be lured into sinful partiality and so easily deny the Truth of your Word for the sake of relevancy, couldn’t I be guilty of that as well? If you really search your heart, you may find you’re more like the world than you’d like to think. More pragmatic. More sentimental. More emotional. Less rooted and grounded in the Word of God than you want to imagine. More concerned with being accepted than being honest.

Who can say they're never partial? Who can say they never compromise the truth in order to preserve their reputation? Who can say they are innocent of the sin of partiality? But, grace comes to repentant sinners! James wasn't writing to make people feel bad about themselves. He wrote to bring them to repentance and change.

How do we do that? By confessing it and repenting. Again and again and again every time we fail. Discovering that God's grace covers the sin of partiality, too. That Jesus died for sinners who suck up to culture to curry favor and stay relevant. That Jesus died for sinners who envy the rich and influential and compromise their values to keep from offending them. That Jesus died to save you and make you an heir in His eternal kingdom, so you don't need to be relevant to the world to be faithful to the Lord. You have the Truth of His Word and just like you, people all over the world are looking for it.

Pray

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