

Rags, Riches, and the Royal Law of Love (James 2:5-9)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on September 6, 2009

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Shortly after the close of the Civil War [June 1865, last battle ended in the month before], a black man entered a fashionable white church in the South, one Sunday morning at the beginning of a communion service. When the time came, he walked down the aisle and knelt at the altar. A rustle of shock and anger swept through the congregation. A distinguished layman immediately stood up, stepped forward to the altar and knelt beside his colored brother. Captured by his spirit, the congregation followed. The layman who set the example: Robert E. Lee.¹

Here's one of two newspaper clippings still around that describe this event from an eyewitness who was among those offended: "Negro Communed at St. Paul's Church," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 16, 1905, p. 5. "Colonel T. L. Broun ... said:

... It was communion day ... amongst those who first arose and advanced to the communion table was a tall, well dressed negro man; very black ... This was a great surprise and shock to the communicants and others present, who frequented that most noted of ... Churches in Virginia. Its effect upon the communicants was startling, and for several moments they retained their seats in solemn silence, and did not move, being deeply chagrined ... General Robert E. Lee was present, and he, ignoring the action and very presence of the negro, immediately arose, in his usual dignified and self-possessed manner, walked up the aisle of the church to the chancel rail, and reverently knelt down to partake of the communion, and not far from where the negro was. This lofty conception of duty by General Lee under such provoking and 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.²

It's fitting on this occasion, as we have celebrated the Lord's table together with the Lord's church on this Lord's Day, that we remind ourselves that our Lord's death purchased our Lord's people from every tribe, tongue, and nation and people to praise the Lord's name. As we celebrate communion, we are reminded of our union together in Christ, in His body, which the bread pictures, a body of people purchased by His precious blood which the cup pictures.

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 and prejudice in other areas of society. We may not live in Palestine during the time the book of James was written. But we do live on planet Earth and whether our discrimination or partiality or pride and prejudice is racial in nature (like in that story) or toward those in rags vs. those who are rich (like in the story James tells), or whether we simply judge people by externals and look down on some and exalt others in our mind because of the world's way of thinking (like in our world and our own personalized example of what our text is about) all such sin has no place in the blood-bought communion of the Crucified Savior who died to not only save and bring together all types of humanity, but to abolish all our sin like that at the cross

James 2 (NASB95) ¹ *My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.*

² 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, ³ and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, 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," ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? ⁵ 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? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? ⁸ If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

We saw last week that there is application for all of us in this text, whether or not we feel this particular illustration is a sin of ours. As v. 9 says, it is sin anytime any partiality is being shown. Or as v. 1 says, God is forbidding even any *attitude within us* of personal favoritism, favoring and focusing on certain types of people to the neglect of others we consider less important. Or as v. 3 says, when we pay *special attention* to only certain types of people based on externals and worldly values, or as v. 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.

OUTLINE FROM LAST WEEK:

The Instruction against Christian Prejudice (2:1)

One Illustration of Christian Prejudice (v. 2-4)

The Inconsistency of Christian Prejudice (v. 5-9)

1. It Contradicts the Gospel and God's Glory in Salvation (v. 5)

2. It Glorifies Those who Oppose God and His Gospel (v. 6-7)

3. It Falls Short of God's Glory and Gospel Love (v. 8-9)

What's at stake in prejudice is no small thing. It is the very gospel itself. It is God's glory, which is only the most important thing in the universe. It's as valuable as the precious blood of Christ Himself. The Lord's glory and His gospel of grace through faith is how this text begins in v. 1, which sets the tone for the chapter.

1. It Contradicts the Gospel and God's Glory in Salvation

⁵ 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? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man ...

James says in v. 5, "listen," to those who were not listening to or looking to the needs of others in the body of Christ. He wants the attention of those who have not been giving proper attention to some in the body of Christ who may be more needy than them and not able to do much in return, but who are in greater need than those they tend to focus on. He is pleading to them with emotion and passion and brotherly love when he adds "Listen, my *beloved brethren*." James wants their attention and he speaks with affection and care and love for these Christian brothers of his who should be loving their fellow brothers who are in the same family of Christ.

This is so important because it so inconsistent with the very gospel we believe in, as v. 1 says, for us to dishonor the poor or the lowly of this world or whoever we neglect in the church, by excluding from our attention those who receive the attention of God's saving mercy. If Jesus is as glorious as that verse says, if He is the very "Lord of glory" Himself (and He is), we contradict and corrupt God's glory in saving sinners when we dishonor those He came to save. When we consider as less important the poor, or anyone in the body of Christ, we treat the shed blood of our Savior as less important than it is, and God as less glorious than He is, and His gospel of sovereign saving grace as less amazing than it is, as well.

When we neglect our brethren who are in rags, like the guy in the end of v. 2, or give him or anyone a lower seat, like the end of v. 3 (whether we do so verbally or mentally), we neglect the fact that in God's sight all of us have nothing but filthy rags of righteousness to offer, and 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 and empty who are destined for hell, and by grace alone, as v. 5 says, He makes them rich in faith and heirs who are destined for heaven instead. 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, and He trades them His perfect robes of righteousness, crediting believers with His perfect righteous life.
- Jesus laid aside His royal robes and regal rights above to be down here, trading praises for prejudice and pain, to be mocked and maligned even by his own brothers, including James growing up (the author of this book of James).
- Jesus gave up temporarily and voluntarily the glories of heaven to hear people insult and revile Him and say all manner of evil against Him falsely.
- Instead of His rightful crown as King of the Universe, He gets a crown of thorns from pagan soldiers and a name tag on His cross that says "King of the Jews."
- Instead of the nations being under His feet, men from the Roman nation nail His feet and hands to a tree that His hands had created as God.
- They murdered the One who gave them life
- the amazing truth is that Jesus chose to not only save many poor and lowly, He chose to become poor and lowly to do so.
- He went from splendor to a stable, from majesty to a manger with manure smell all around, to be born to a poor but humble couple, so that all who are spiritually poor and humble can be born again.
- Jesus became Son of Man that we might become adopted sons and 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. And not just in the next life, this verse speaks of how God chooses to save certain physically poor people and to make them spiritually rich -- rich in faith here!

IN Luke 2, this is the heart of the gospel and height of God's glory. As the gospel of Luke begins, the "good news" / gospel first came to poor shepherds, the lowly ones in society:

¹⁰ *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you **good news [or gospel]** of great joy **which will be for all the people**;* ¹¹ *for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* ¹² *"This will be a sign for you: you will find **a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.**"* [what a humble lowly poor way to start, but that's our Lord] ¹³ *And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,* ¹⁴ *"**Glory to God in the highest*** ... ²⁰ *The shepherds went back, **glorifying and praising God** ...*

In Luke 1, Mary magnifies / glorifies the Lord for His good news: ⁵² *"He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble [or lowly]* ⁵³ *"HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; And sent away the rich empty-handed.*

When we reverse that pattern in the church, James says, we are reversing the very nature of the gospel. Mighty unbelievers are dethroned, the rich, if full of self, are emptied. Don't exalt the high and mighty who God will bring down, and don't send away the lowly and needy who Christ called to come unto Him to be filled!

In Luke 4, Jesus was being glorified / praised as He taught (v. 15)

¹⁶ *And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read.* ¹⁷ *And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,* ¹⁸ *"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, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED,*** ¹⁹ *TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."* ²⁰ *And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him.* ²¹ *And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

6:20 *And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God ...*

Poverty itself does not automatically save or bless or guarantee a place in God's kingdom, but the context and parallel makes clear that realizing one's spiritual poverty is the way to heaven (Mt 5:3). It's for people who in physical lowliness, emptiness, and neediness, who as a result recognize their *spiritual* lowliness, emptiness and neediness, and who come to the Lord as spiritual beggars and the spiritually bankrupt with humble hearts who plead with God to have mercy on them as a sinner through the cross of Christ, the wonder of James 2:5 is: *God makes the poor in spirit rich in faith!* The end of the verse says they love the Lord, but their love is the result of God's choice/grace, not the cause of it

It would be incorrect to conclude in Jas 2:5 that poor people are better, or that rich people are inherently bad, and that's the basis of God's choosing, because that's not what the Scripture says. Certainly we're not to despise the rich, reverse discrimination!

It is clear in James 2:5 that God has a love and care for the poor and needy, orphans and widows, and others that the world overlooks, and a special place for them in His heart, if this verse means anything (and it does). But this sovereign love of God that chooses especially to save from these ranks does not mean God has no love for the rich, or no type of care for other classes of people.

The gospels record that even the rich young ruler who rejected Christ, Christ saw him as he walked away and loved him (as far as we know, the man never trusted Christ and was not one of those “chosen,” as James 2:5 calls them, but our Lord loved him). I don’t have to reconcile God’s love for sinners and the fact that He hasn’t chosen to save all sinners, I just have to recognize whatever the Bible says (I don’t simply reject what doesn’t neatly reconcile).

It’s also wrong to conclude all poor people are saved, or that rich people can’t be. The NT records several people God saved who had wealth (Zaccheus, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea)

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 (NIV) ²⁶ *Brothers, **think of what you were when you were called.** Not many of you were wise **by human standards**; not many were **influential**; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ **But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not [lit. non-entities, nobodies]—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.***

If we started a Facebook page for the group of the lowly, needy, foolish, weak, despised, non-influential, nobodies and nothings, the world would think we’re nuts and need to see a shrink for our self-image issues. If we changed our church name to that, it wouldn’t fit on the sign out front and may not work, but that’s what we are.

It’s not that there’s *not any* from other groups, but *not many*. God intentionally chooses most of us from 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 that there’s no question as to the source of salvation and no debate as to where the glory goes. If a church chooses to focus attentions and energies on others who are more impressive by outward human standards and to dishonor those of the opposite camp whom God delights to choose and save; it turns upside-down God’s very purposes and reverse the gospel!

2nd Inconsistency of Christian Prejudice:

2. It Glorifies Those who Oppose God and His Gospel

v. 6b *Is it not the rich who oppress you ...?*

James is not prejudiced against the rich - that would go against his whole point. But he is greatly concerned of 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. And for the original readers, it was predominantly the rich as a class of people that were opposing and oppressing the Lord and His people.

When James speaks of the rich in this context, it is the ungodly rich. How did they oppress? James 5 rebukes them:

⁴ *Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.* ⁵ *You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.*

In the historical context, James is writing to Jews who had been dispersed abroad, persecuted, poor as a result for the most part, and forced in many cases to work the land of the small upper class, the wealthy landowners notorious for injustice, oppression, etc.

‘what we know of conditions in the first-century Middle East [is a] small group of wealthy landowners and merchants accumulated more and more power, while large numbers of people were forced from their land and grew even poorer ... rich people were undoubtedly using their wealth and influence with the courts to secure favorable verdicts against the poor. Practices familiar in every age, such as forcing people to forfeit their land for late payment of mortgages, insisting on ruinous interest rates for monetary help, and the like, are probably in view.’³

James 2:6b ... *and personally drag you into court?*

“If a creditor met a debtor on the street, he could seize him by the neck of his robe, nearly throttling him, and literally drag him to the law-courts.”⁴ 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!

⁷ *Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?*

Not only was their physical and financial persecution coming mainly from those with wealth, but apparently their spiritual persecution as well was primarily from the upper class. We don’t know for sure the content of the blasphemy or slander, but perhaps it was those mocking the name of Christ by which the early NT church began to be called as a derogatory nickname: “Christian.” They have found ancient graffiti mocking Christians (1st cent AD?) - a crucified man with head of an ass / donkey being worshipped. The caption crudely written in Greek not unlike what you might see in public restroom stalls today: "Alexamenos worships [his] God." The early church father Tertullian writes within a century of the drawing that Christians, along with Jews, were accused of worshipping a deity with the head of an ass. He also mentions an apostate Jew who carried around Carthage a caricature of a Christian with ass's ears and hooves, labeled Deus Christianorum Onocoetes ("the God of the Christians begotten of an ass").⁵

In our day the honorable name of our Lord who owns us is also dishonored. The noble names of our beautiful Lord and Savior are dragged through the mud and used as every type of curse word in society in general, but especially by the influential movers and shakers in entertainment, media, and Hollywood who are on a mission to assault every value we hold dear – and we as American Christians glorify that by our watching it, laughing at it, and paying good money for it, and investing hundreds of hours of precious time giving attention to what blasphemes what’s precious!

Lest you think you think you're not guilty of what James 2 talks about, let me get in your kitchen and home a little more: this last month, how much time did you spend praying for, thinking of, talking to, seeking to serve the more needy and lonely among us? And how much time did you invest in the same month engrossed in worldly entertainment, much of which dishonors the name of the Lord? The point of James 2 applies to you whether or not a celebrity walks through our doors on Sunday that you focus on to the neglect of talking to the needy among us – if you focus on and follow those celebrities through the media during the week, but have little or no thought of your brothers and sisters in Christ, what are you doing, beloved?!

Are you paying special attention to the latest gossip of media & TV (not even real people you ever see) but not the lowly in need of gospel ministry that you do see? Are you enamored with celebrity sinners out there more than the Savior and those for whom He died in here? Aren't most in Hollywood blaspheming Christ's name?

Last week's intro: guy walks in, looks like he's a congressman, senator, or lawyer or law-maker or distinguished judge from Sac or SF, and you're stumbling over yourselves to flatter him? Aren't these the types of people who are persecuting Christian values? Aren't these the guys who more than once have usurped the voice of Californians by legalizing same-sex marriage and villainizing and persecuting any who dared support Prop 8 later (a battle still raging)? Aren't these the same types of people in our State that also temporarily made it virtually illegal to have your kids in a Christian school-home environment, another measure that was thankfully overturned? Aren't these the same people who propose bills to make illegal the biblical duty to discipline your children lovingly right here in our State? What are we doing?

If you're a student in school, who do you tend to focus on and who do you neglect or look down on, based on their looks or externals? At church? It pains me to say a lonely visitor here last 2 weeks as I taught on this, felt very unwelcome and found you very unfriendly. Not every visitor or person feels that way, but maybe that's part of the point and part of the problem. Do we show partiality in pride, selfishly ignoring some in the body?

Earthly splendor can only fade in the presence of real regal splendor in the royal King we sing to:

*Beautiful Savior Wonderful Counselor
Clothed in majesty Lord of history
You're the Way the Truth the Life
Star of the Morning glorious in holiness
You're the Risen One heaven's Champion
And You reign You reign over all ...
I long to be Where the praise is never ending
Yearn to dwell Where the glory never fades
Where countless worshipers Will share one song
And cries of worthy will honor the Lamb*

We'll all be singing one song in eternity on the same level, all the lowest level with our faces to the ground, all honor and glory to the Lord of glory alone who humbled Himself to death - how can we not be humble in this life? The ground is level at the cross, beloved

3rd Inconsistency of Christian Prejudice: It Falls Short of God's Glory and Gospel Love

⁸ *If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*

Partiality is no little sin or minor misdemeanor. It's a violation of the law of God, a sin that falls short of the glory of God. This is the Word of our Lord of glory, as James 2:1 calls Him.

It's all about the gospel and it's all about God's glory. What the Word of God calls us to do is not just something we can do on our own by human willpower or with the motive of trying to be a good person – it's got to be God-produced in a gospel-transformed heart, doing it from the Lord, through the Lord, to the glory of the Lord. If you have not yet confessed Jesus as your Lord and come to true salvation in Him and His gospel, I pray you will do so this very day.

¹ Paul Lee Tan, (1979). *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations*. Garland TX: Bible Communications, #4739.

² <http://www.leearchive.info/shelf/schwarz/index.html>

³ Douglas Moo, *PNTC*, James, p. 108-109.

⁴ William Barclay (Daily Study Bible: the Letters of James & Peter [Westminster Press], p. 67.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexamenos_graffito