

James – Life after Faith

James 2:1-7

“Pride and Prejudice: Missing the Kingdom of God at the Door of the Church”

1. Many years ago, a medieval theologian named John Scotus was visiting Rome, and was escorted by the Pope into the Vatican’s treasuries. Pointing to all the money and assets, the Pope said, “No longer does the church have to say, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’”
2. Scotus quickly replied, “That’s true, but also no longer can we say, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ...rise up and walk’.”
3. In 2,000 years, the church has moved from the catacombs to cathedrals, from prison cells to worship centers, from upper rooms to arenas.
4. These days, celebrities accept awards with diamond crosses dangling from their necks, and drug-enhanced athletes give thanks to Jesus for the ability to hit a ball.
5. We’ve come a long way, but have we come in the right direction? Is it possible that in our efforts to pack our pews, and build our buildings we have misunderstood the kingdom of God completely?
6. In the second chapter of his epistle, Brother James deals with an issue that was as contemptible in the first century as it is common in the 21st century.
7. James warns the people of God not to live out their faith while practicing a sinful favoritism toward society’s elite. He says in verse 1, *“My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.”*
8. This text calls for us as God’s people to see if through pride and prejudice we might be missing the kingdom of God at the very doors of our church.
9. Let’s look at this passage together, and follow Brother James as he points us to some failures that may be realities in our church, or in our lives. First of all, notice that James describes for us:

I. A SCENE THAT IS SADLY COMMON IN THE CHURCH OF GOD

1. Beginning in verse 2, James sets up a hypothetical situation that does not require all that much imagination to connect it to reality.
2. The setting is what James calls in verse 2, *“your assembly.”* This is what amounts to a typical Sunday morning service.

3. On this particular Sunday, two very different visitors attend the service. Based on the contrast between them, they are greeted and treated very differently by the people of the church.

4. Church should be the one place where everybody is somebody, but as James' story reveals, and as is all too often the case, the church can be as segmented and segregated as the sin-sick world around it.

5. Notice a couple of things about this scene that James describes for us. First of all, notice:

A. The characters described in this scene

1. Look beginning in verse 2. James says, *"For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel..."*

2. The first character in this story is Mr. Goldfinger. The original language actually describes him as a "gold-fingered man". His gold rings were his status symbol in the first-century.

3. If this story were told today, perhaps the man would step out of chrome-covered SUV, and walk in wearing a three-piece, tailored suit, while checking his Rolex to see if he was on time.

4. Look again at the text, and notice a second character in this story. Continuing in verse 2, James says, *"...and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment."*

5. The word translated "vile" here is basically the same word that is translated as "filthiness" in verse 21 of chapter one. The idea is that his clothes are shabby and dirty.

6. This man walked up to the church from off the street, and his clothes look as if he had slept in them, and smell as bad as they look.

7. These are the two visitors, but there is one more character – the greeter who meets them at the door. Notice verse 3. It says, *"And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay [or fine] clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:"*

8. This socially-savvy, seeker-friendly usher leads the man in the suit to a comfortable and prominent pew, while he tells the poor man to stand in the back, or else sit on the floor.

9. These are the characters described in this scene, and would to God that we could not so easily see them all behaving just like this in our own churches.

10. Notice not only the characters described in this scene, but notice also:

B. The conduct described in this scene

1. You don't have to know Greek, or understand systematic theology in order to see what is going on in this scene that James describes for us.
2. This scene is an illustration of the conduct that James condemns in the first verse. It is the sin of showing partiality and favoritism toward a particular group or person.
3. It is holding your faith in Christ while being a respecter of persons. It is *claiming that* you believe Christ died for all, while only *proclaiming that* to a select group of people.
4. If we are not careful, this hypothetical scene will become a practical reality in our church. We will consciously or unconsciously target a certain class and kind of people.
5. We will witness to and welcome in only those who look like us, talk like us, dress like us, think like us, and act like us.
6. We will become a cookie-cutter fellowship that better resembles a club than a congregation. We will have cultural uniformity, but not a genuine Christian unity.
7. Mark Twain said, "Prejudice is the ink with which all history is written."ⁱ
8. I don't know about that, but considering how common this scene is in the church of God, you might say that prejudice is the ink with which most church membership rolls are written.
9. Though 2,000 years old, there is something definitely and disturbingly familiar about this scene that James paints in this text. Notice a second thing we draw from this passage.
10. Notice not only that we have here *a scene that is sadly common in the church of God*, but notice also secondly that what James describes is:

II. A SIN THAT IS SOUNDLY CONDEMNED BY THE WORD OF GOD

1. This favoritism for a certain class or kind of person is something that goes completely against the character of our God.
2. In Acts 10:34, Peter said, "...*God is no respecter of persons...*" In Leviticus 19:15, God commanded his people to do the same. He said, "...*thou shalt not*

respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.”

3. The favoritism of the snooty usher in verse 3 is something that the Word of God soundly condemns. It is an ungodly and unholy practice.

4. There are two aspects of this sin that I believe James is specifically confronting in this text. Notice first of all, this sin involves:

A. Viewing people superficially

1. In verse 4, James asks two questions. The first is this, “*Are ye not then partial in yourselves...*”

2. The word “partial” is translated from a word that literally means to create divisions. James’ question is literally, “Have you not then created divisions and distinctions among yourselves?”

3. By seating the rich man, and slighting the poor man, the usher had distinguished between two people in a way that was wrong and unwarranted by gospel.

4. What caused this distinction? It goes back to verse one. Notice there the phrase, “respect of persons”.

5. That phrase is translated from one word that literally means “to focus on the face”. The usher had judged each of the two men by what he saw of them on the outside. He viewed them superficially rather than spiritually.

6. We too are tempted to size people up by what we can see of them on the outside. Their apparel and their appearance too often form our opinions of them.

7. Contrary to this, the Lord told Samuel, in I Samuel 16:7, “*...the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.*”

8. There’s a little poem that goes like this:

“Full many people go to church,
As everyone knows;
Some go to close their eyes,
And some to eye their clothes.”ⁱⁱ

9. Somewhere, we have got learn to stop viewing people superficially, based on their appearance. The man with the tie may be no more spiritual than the man with the t-shirt.

10. This sin that is condemned by the Word of God is not only the sin of viewing people superficially, but it also involves:

B. Viewing people selfishly

1. Look at the second rhetorical question James asks in verse 4. He asks, "...[have ye not then] *become judges of evil thoughts?*"
2. When we distinguish between people, based on their outward appearance, James says we become judges whose thoughts or motives are evil.
3. What are these evil thoughts and motives? Well, based on the story James used, it must be greed.
4. The rich man is schmoozed while the poor man is shunned, and it must be because the rich man had money to give.
5. One writer commented on this passage and said, "One of the great dangers of the church is to look for people who can help us instead of looking for people we can help."ⁱⁱⁱ
6. When we are worried more about budgets than baptisms, and more about finances than faithfulness, we fall into the trap of viewing people selfishly.
7. I read about a poor, little cleaning lady, who tried to join the fashionable, up-town first church. The preacher was a little concerned about how his wealthy, influential members would feel about this meager, little woman sitting on the pew with them.
8. He met with the woman and told her to go home and talk to God about it, and then let him know later what God had said. The little woman never returned to the church again, and the preacher began to wonder about her.
9. He ran into her one day as she was scrubbing the floor of a building he entered, and he asked her why she hadn't come back.
10. She told him, "I talked to God about it, just like you said, and God told me not to worry about it, that He had been trying to get into your church too for twenty years."
11. It is a sin to view people superficially and selfishly. If God is no respecter of persons, then we cannot be without disobeying Him.
12. There is a third thing we find in this text, and it is what I feel to be the real heart of this passage. James points us not only to *a scene that is sadly common*

in the church of God, and a sin that is soundly condemned by the Word of God, but we see also finally:

III. A SYSTEM THAT IS SEVERLY COUNTER TO THE PLAN OF GOD

1. Look closely at verse 5, James says, *“Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?”*
2. Now look at the first part of verse 6. James says, *“But ye have despised the poor...”*
3. In verse 5, James calls for close attention, and then he explains the nature of God’s plan in this world, and the make-up of His kingdom.
4. Then in verse 6, he condemns the church for working in a way that is completely counter to that plan and that kingdom.
5. At the heart of this passage is an indictment against a church that would follow the values of a sinful culture, while forgetting the truth of what God’s kingdom really looks like.
6. Notice with me a couple of reasons why this system that James confronts is counter to God’s plan for His church. Think first of all about:

A. Who this system favors

1. In verses 6 and 7, James points out an irony that was true of the first century church, and is still true today.
2. He says that while you are despising the poor and needy, the rich people you are courting are actually your strongest enemies.
3. He asks in verse 6, *“...Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?”* He goes on in verse 7, *“Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?”*
4. The early church was made up of mostly poor peasants and servants. They were the bottom of the societal rung, and they were often abused by the upper class and wealthy.
5. James asks, *“Why are you so interested in the pleasure and approval of the very people who oppress you and oppose you?”*
6. There is a temptation and a tendency for the church to try desperately to be cool and attractive to the mainstream of our society.

7. As a result, we try to appeal to the educated, upper-class, socially-stylish people. We target the *Starbucks* and sushi crowd, with their PDA's and Polos, thinking their presence in our church will validate us in the world.

8. The only problem, is that so very often, that is the same crowd who resents the presence of the Church in the world, and scoffs at the message of the gospel we proclaim.

9. It is a sad and ironic system of operation when the church chases the very classes and culture that despise it.

10. We must realize that the Bible will never make Oprah's book club, and the church will never be cool in a world that sees the cross of Jesus as silliness.

11. There is something further that makes this system so counter to the plan of God. Notice not only who this system favors, but notice also further:

B. What this system forgets

1. In this text, James is rebuking the church for misunderstanding the truth about God's kingdom.

2. Look again at verse 6, James says, *"Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?"*

3. While these church members were fawning after the rich, they had forgotten what their own Savior had said. In Luke 6:20, Jesus said, *"Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God."*

4. Not long before that statement, in Luke 4:18, Jesus said, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor..."*

5. As much as it stings our egos to hear it, we need to be reminded of how Paul described the church in I Corinthians 1:26. He said, *"For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:"*

6. If we are not careful, we will value the same select people and the same shallow principles of our sin-sick society, and we will forget that the kingdom of God is primarily made up of those who the world overlooks and undervalues.

7. We need to be reminded that Christ is building His body, and the people who make it up probably look less like the yuppy in a BMW, and more like a single-mom in a station wagon full of kids.

8. We need to recognize that the Kingdom of Christ will more likely include a calloused-handed mechanic with his name on his shirt, than a well-dressed executive with his name on the office door.

9. James is not saying that no rich man ever gets saved, or that every poor man is saved already. No, but He is reminding us of the overall plan of God.

10. The plan of God for his church is for us to, as the parable in Luke 14 says, *"...Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind."*

1. In 1883, Jane Austen published her second and most famous novel, *Pride and Prejudice*.

2. One of the themes that Austen tried to communicate through the novel is that social standing and wealth were not necessarily advantages in the world.

3. I am not sure that's true. But, while social standing and wealth may offer some advantages in a world where those things are valued, they should make no difference whatsoever in the church of the Lord Jesus.

4. Pride and prejudice at the house of God are sure signs that the church has missed the truth of the kingdom of God.

5. D.L. Moody hung a sign over the door of his church in Chicago that I believe would have pleased Brother James. It said, "Ever welcome to this house of God are the strangers and the poor."

6. May that be true of this church as well, and may we never hold the faith of Christ as respecters of persons.

ⁱ Hawkins, O.S., *Getting Down to Brass Tacks*, (Loizeaux, Neptune, NJ, 1993), p. 66

ⁱⁱ Gregory, Joel, James: Faith Works!, (Convention Press, Nashville, TN 1986), p. 34

ⁱⁱⁱ Draper Jr., James T., James: Faith & Works in Balance, (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL, 1981), p. 74