

## *Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript*

### **Rich Man, Poor Man James 2:1-13 Part 2**

Samuel, when he went to the home of Jesse to anoint one of his sons as the next King of Israel to succeed Saul, he saw Eliab, and he thought to himself that this certainly would be the next king. But what did the Lord say to him in **1 Sam. 16:7**, **“Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”** And this is exactly right. Apart from the grace of God operating in our lives we will inevitably and unprofitably be influenced by what we see.

I received Christ through the high school ministry at First Baptist Church in Compton, California. This particular church had a congregational form of government which meant that from time to time they would call business meetings where certain items would be discussed by the congregation and then voted on. I was a fairly new believer who had very little interest in church business meetings but some of the high schoolers asked to me to go with them to this particular meeting and I did.

Now I need to give you the setting so that you might appreciate what happened. Compton was fast becoming a racially divided community. On the west side of the railroads there was a large growing black population and on the east side of the tracks was an all white middle class population. The church I was attending was a white church but it was located on the west side of the tracks. So what do you think was inevitable? Blacks would start attending the church and at some point in time they may even apply for membership. And that is exactly what happened. At this business meeting the congregation was meeting to discuss and decide whether or not they would permit a young black woman and her children to become members of the church.

You would think that this decision was a “no brainer.” You would think that of course they would allow her to join the church. But this was not their decision. After a very brief discussion which highlighted the fact that there were other black churches in the area that she could join if she wanted to become a church member, the church rejected her request. This was very much impressed upon me as a young person and as a new Christian. I still can see her sitting there in this congregation listening to this discussion and hurting for her.

Why was this decision made? I believe it was made not because it was in the best interest of the woman and her children, even though this is how it was represented in the discussion, but rather it was all about themselves. This church looked at the outward appearance and made a judgment on the basis of externals. If I am correct in this evaluation then this church had done something that night which was terribly sinful. They were guilty of personal favoritism. They treated one person differently than another simply based on their racial biases.

Partiality or personal favoritism is sin and it is this very issue that James addresses in **James 2:1-13**. **“My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.**

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(2) For if a man comes into our 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. (10) For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. (11) 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. (12) So speak and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. (13) For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.” There is not a more pointed Scripture in all of the Bible concerning the sin of personal favoritism than what we have just read. And we must not miss the significance of what James is telling us.

You will of course remember the theme of this epistle which is tests of “living faith.” This epistle was written so that we might be able to know whether or not we are saved or not saved; whether or not we are a part of the family of God or not a part of the family of God. The first test that we considered in this epistle was the “Response to Trials test.” This test is found in **James 1:2-18**. The second test that we considered in this epistle was the “Response to the Word test.” This test is found in **James 1:19-27**. We are now considering the third test. We will call this the “PARTIALITY TEST” which is found in the passage that we have just read, **James 2:1-13**. Just as our response to trials can tell us a great deal about our true spiritual condition; just as our response to the Word can tell us a great deal about our true spiritual condition, so also the way we respond to people in various given situations can tell us a great deal about our spiritual condition. If we treat one person one way and another person a different way based upon our fleshly biases and fleshly appetites then we are in trouble. How are we treating people? Are we treating people impartially? To help us in answering this question we have James 2:1-13. We will divide this passage into five different parts. Hopefully the study of this passage of Scripture will sensitize us to the danger of showing partiality that lurks in the heart of each one of us. Hopefully the study of this passage will help us to become more and more in our thinking and actions like Jesus.

The first area that we considered was the principle in **V. 1**. Let us read **James 2:1** “**My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.**” What is the principle which in this verse is so succinctly stated? For us to profess faith in the gospel of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ while holding an attitude of personal favoritism is contradictory and incompatible.

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Now we are going to go on in this passage and consider the next area James brings to our attention. We will call this area “the example.”

### The Example

James in **VV. 2-4** gives us an example of “personal favoritism” that was particularly appropriate for their situation, and it involved the church’s different responses to people of different degrees of material wealth. To better appreciate James’s emphasis on material wealth or lack thereof in this passage, it is necessary to understand that the vast majority of early converts to Christianity were Jewish and poor.

In a diatribe against Christians written in A.D. 178, the Roman Philosopher Celsus attacked Christians to a large extent simply because most of them were poor and uneducated. He severely criticized the commonness of believers, portraying them as vulgar, “like a swarm of bats or ants creeping out of their nests, or frogs holding a symposium amid a swamp, or worms in a convention in a corner of mud.

Because the church was by and large so poor it called its members to make hard decisions. And at least initially in the life of the early church those hard decisions were made without any evidence of partiality. It says in **Acts 2:44-45**, “**And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; (45) and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.**” Notice it does not say, “**And were sharing them with the popular or the beautiful**” but rather “**they were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.**” A short while later in **Acts 4:34-37** it says, “**For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of sales, (35) and lay them at the apostle’s feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need. (36) And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement), (37) and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.**” The church was continually being challenged as to what they were going to do in respect to the poor and it appears that within the first few years in Jerusalem things were going pretty well.

But having poor people around us all the time and continually being placed in a position of having to give ourselves sacrificially to them in order to meet their very basic needs for food and covering could be very wearing. You can imagine how you might be tempted to respond partially to a wealthy person if they came to visit your struggling congregation.

For a moment in our minds let us pretend to be a struggling congregation, a poor congregation, finding it difficult just to make ends meet and to care for one another. Now if Bill Gates were to visit us today, who many people consider to be the richest man in the world, and a very poor man also chooses to visit us, it would be very interesting to sit back and see how we respond. Would we be partial? James in **James 2:2-4** actually plays out a very similar scenario for his readers. In these verses James depicts the arrival of a rich and a poor man while the readers are assembled.

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Listen to the words of James, **“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?”**

The precise nature and purpose of the “meeting” is not clearly defined by James. But we can, I believe, in light of the context, say that it was a religious gathering of some kind. The word for “meeting” is the Greek word SUNAGOGEN which lit. means “synagogue” or in other words a “place of meeting.” The use of the term here to describe a religious gathering of believers rather than using the word EKKLESIA which is the Greek word that is translated church gives evidence to the very early date that most people ascribe to this epistle. In fact just as a reminder hopefully you remember that James is in fact the very first New Testament epistle that was written.

As these believers were gathering a visitor appears. Just as our services this weekend are open to visitors the same was true in the early church. The first visitor that appears does not come into the service wearing a sign saying “Bill Gates, richest man in the world” but the fact that he is wealthy is apparent.

The phrase “with a gold ring” literally means “gold-fingered.” The term does not suggest just one ring but rather a finger laden with gold rings. The wearing of “a” ring was customary among the Jews. When the prodigal son returned you will remember that the father told his servants in Luke to what? **“... bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.”** But in Roman society, the wealthy wore rings on their left hand in profusion. A sign of wealth, rings were worn with great ostentation. There were even shops in Rome where rings could be rented for a special occasion. Seneca wrote “We adorn our fingers with rings and we distribute gems over every joint.” No doubt this ostentatious practice also spread to the provinces and would be known to James’s readers. The practice of wearing rings as a manifestation of luxury and display invaded the churches. Clement of Alexandria (155-220 AD) felt it necessary to urge Christians to wear only one ring because it was needed for purposes of sealing. It apparently became such a problem that the Apostolic Constitutions written in approx. 381 AD warned Christians against fine clothing and rings, since these were all signs of “lasciviousness.” Displaying one’s wealth did not stop at just the rings. Look at the way he was dressed.

Look at **V. 2, “For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes ....”** **“Fine”** means “bright” or “shining” and probably refers to the glittering color of his clothes. Luke used the same word for the “elegant robe” in which Herod Antipas and his soldiers mockingly arrayed Jesus in **Luke 23:11**, and also for the “shining clothes” of the angel who appeared to Cornelius in **Acts 10:30**. The reference is probably to the shining white garments often worn by wealthy Jews.

After this wealthy man enters then it says at the end of **V. 2 “... and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes.”** This poor man displayed no rings, and his garment was **“dirty.”** The word “dirty”(RHUPARA) means “shabby, worn, unsightly. As a poor laboring man, he probably had only one garment, and it was work-stained and soiled. His dress stands out in stark contrast to the “fine” clothes of the rich man.

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Now what happens? As these two men enter, both most likely visitors, they were treated very differently. Let us read **V. 3**, “**And you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “you sit here in a good place,”** This very likely means that they found him a place to sit that they felt was appropriate and fitting for a man of his status.

But then what did they say to the “poor man?” “**... and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool.”** He is given a choice, but either alternative reveals indifference to his comfort or feelings. If the reference to his “footstool” is taken literally, the words imply that “the speaker has a footstool as well as a good seat.” If this is true then the poor man is not evenly offered the footstool of this person who was seeking to get both men seated. This story is very clear and pointed in illustrating the problem of personal favoritism. And now in **V. 4** James makes it really clear what is at the heart of such behavior. Let us read **V. 4** “**have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?”** Of course they have made distinctions. Their different response to the rich man and the poor man exposed their practice of favoritism, judging people purely based on external criteria which the Lord deems meaningless.

What does James think of this? Let us look at the verse again, “**have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?”** Why did James call their motives evil? Their motives were evil because they were self serving.

Another poor man in their assembly meant an increasing load of responsibility to provide for his basic needs. The poor man was one more mouth to feed. But the rich man, rather than being a material drain, potentially represented a source of material blessing. The attitude of the assembly that James is speaking of in this passage was this, “Better to be served than to serve.” This certainly does not reflect the heart of Christ.

### CONCLUSION

There is no sin in being rich. There is no sin in being poor. But there is sin when people begin to make distinctions between people from evil motives based upon superficial worldly criteria that has no biblical basis.

What does **Mark 10:45** say? “**For ... the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many.**” Let me ask you a question. When Christ met people during the period of his incarnation was he more concerned for them or Him? For them. When He met people did He say, “How can they serve me?” Or did he say, “How can I serve them?” If we would look on people as Jesus would look on people we will not be guilty of showing favoritism.

In the story I told you about this black woman who was turned down for membership at this white church, what was the problem? I believe they were afraid. Afraid of what? Of losing their church. I believe that they knew when they opened their doors to black members that many more would come and ultimately the church they had known and loved would be in their mind “gone.”

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Oh let us not lose sight of what it is to be a disciple of Christ. It means that we are committed to walking in the footsteps of Jesus. And that means that we will want to do what is in the best interest of the person God brings across our path no matter how it might impact our lives. And if we respond as He would respond it testifies to ourselves and others that our faith is in fact genuine.