

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Rich Man, Poor Man
James 2:1-13
Part Four

The theme of this epistle is “Tests of Living Faith.” This epistle was written so that we might know whether we are saved or not saved. The very first test that we find in this epistle is the “Response to Trials Test” in **James 1:2-18**. The second test that we considered was the “Response to the Word” test in **James 1:19-27**. We are now considering the third test in this epistle and that is the “the Impartiality Test” in **James 2:1-13**.

Let us read this section of Scripture, **“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. (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.”** This passage deals with the sin of personal favoritism.

In order to help us understand as much as we can about this very important topic, I have broken it down into five parts.

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. Personal favoritism is a very ugly sin because it is the antithesis of how Jesus responded to people. Jesus in every situation was concerned only with what? Service! When he approached people Jesus did not size them up by their outward appearance and determine whether or not he was going to serve them or not serve them. He always, in each and every situation, was committed to serving, not looking at what he could get but rather at what he could give.

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

The second area of teaching that we considered was “the example” in **VV. 2-4**, **“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?”** This certainly is not the only scenario where personal favoritism can be exercised, but in the time period that James is writing, distinctions being made on the basis of material wealth were certainly a matter of great concern for James.

And James continues to build on this example as we moved to the third area of teaching last week and we will call this, “The Inconsistency” in VV. 5-7, **“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?”** For the readers to show preferential treatment of the rich over the poor was totally inconsistent. How was it inconsistent? Their preferential treatment was first of all inconsistent with God’s choice of the poor which we considered last week.

Hostile actions of the rich toward them

This week we will consider a second reason for calling the favoritism shown to the rich over the poor inconsistent. The preferential treatment of the rich man was inconsistent with the hostile actions of the rich toward them (VV. 6b-7).

As we continue our study of the inconsistency of personal favoritism as manifested in the example that James furnishes us in this text, I would hope that we would see the futility of the type of behavior that is being condemned. So let us look at the hostile actions of the rich toward the readers in general in this passage.

Let us read the second half of **V. 6**, **“Is it not the rich who oppress you?”** “Oppress” (KATADUNASTEUO) means to tyrannize, to exercise inordinate power over others. It conveys the picture of a potentate exercising his power over those under his control in a hurtful and oppressive manner. In **Acts 10:38**, its only other occurrence in the New Testament, the verb is used of the devil’s tyrannical rule over his victims. The term is used frequently in the Septuagint of the exploitation by the unprincipled rich who were “lording it over” them. The present tense of the verb denotes repeated experiences of such oppression. And this phenomenon continues on right up to the present day.

Let me ask you a question, “Do the rich continue to oppress the poor? Or has this somehow changed over the centuries?” Nothing has changed. Just consider what is continuing to happen around the world just in the area of the exploitation of children.

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

I am sure none of us would knowingly support a business that exploits children. But the chances are that each of us have unknowingly done just that. Perhaps you splurged on a handcrafted carpet, without knowing it was made by a seven-year-old from India, where children are sometimes chained to looms for 12 hours a day. Maybe you just bought a soccer ball for your son or daughter, without realizing your gift was produced by a five-year-old in some factory in Pakistan. Even some of our more mundane purchases ---- a leather bag, a shirt, a pair of jeans, or produce from a local grocery store -- could be the product of child labor.

Around the world today, some 250 million boys and girls between the ages of five and 14 are exploited in hazardous work conditions, according to the International Labor Organization. Most of the children live in the developing world, but even in industrialized countries such as the United States, hundreds of thousands of underage boys and girls are at work in sweatshops and farm fields.

The rich even to this day are very capable of exploiting the poor. In fact, in general we need to understand that if the rich could gain an advantage through the oppression of the poor, and if they had the opportunity, they would. And this will continue on as long as man in his unredeemed state inhabits this world.

But James is not finished with the wicked behavior of many of the world's rich. As a further aspect of their oppression the verse goes on to say, “**and personally drag you into court?**” Being drug into court is not a picture of direct religious persecution, which also might be instigated by a mob on some poor zealot, but rather of judicial persecution in order to gain some financial advantage. The rich were using the courts to exploit the poor, either through appeal to unjust legal enactments or by their power with the judges to deprive the poor of their just rights.

If the poor, through their experience, know the way the rich as a group typically behave toward them, why would these believers who were mostly poor continue to give them preferential treatment? It is inconsistent. Certainly, I can't say I know the answer to that but I do have an opinion. I believe it is very similar to our experience with the “Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes.”

Most of you I am sure are familiar with this particular sweepstakes. This particular company mails us an envelope which offers us the opportunity to enter a contest with the potential for great riches. If we are willing to buy a magazine through them the process is very simple. But if we are not, the process to enter becomes significantly more complicated. First of all, those who are not ordering but who wish to enter the contest are directed to find the sweepstakes instructions, and of course these instructions are printed in very small letters. Actually the instructions are printed in tiny letters. After squinting to see what we are to do, they tell us that we have to get a 3X5 card and print on that card in block letters something like “NO ORDER.” Do you realize how difficult they are making this for us. We have to get up and find a pen that works. We have to find a 3X5 card which we may very well not have in the house.

All of these steps I believe are designed to manipulate us just to give in and order a magazine so that we would avoid the hassle. And I think that many of you here today who have gone through this process have concluded the very same thing.

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

But even though this is true, we may very well subject ourselves once more to this whole process of harassment because we believe that there is a possibility of personal gain.

The reasonable thing to do, the consistent thing to do in light of the publisher's clearing house treatment of those who are not putting in an order, is to throw the whole thing into the trash, but for many this will not be done. And the very same dynamic appears to be present in the lives of the readers of this epistle. They have been mistreated by the rich and though it is unreasonable and inconsistent in light of their conduct to treat them in a preferential way, they still do it, somehow entertaining the notion that there is the possibility of something to be gained in doing so.

James is saying to his readers, "Why are you giving special treatment to the rich when they treat you so badly?" Highlighting the oppressive treatment that characterizes the lives of the rich, he asks his readers two questions which assume a positive answer. The first question was, "Is it not the rich who oppress you?" then he follows this question with a second question "Is it not the rich who personally drag you into court?"

James is not yet done with his shock at the preferential treatment his readers are extending to the rich in light of the conduct of the rich themselves, not only toward them but even toward their faith. He therefore asks a third question. Look at **V. 7**, "**Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?**" This statement reveals a bitter religious hostility on the part of the rich. Are the rich hostile toward the very things that we spiritually value? If you would believe this statement by James you would have to say so.

My wife works part time in a local surgery center. A number of years ago an employee of this surgery center attended our church with my wife and this person very much enjoyed that experience. When a conversation subsequently came up about their experience at our church, in front of the owner of the surgery center, the owner was asked to come and visit us. The owner, who from the standpoint of the world would certainly be described as rich said, "I don't need this God stuff!" Would every rich person respond in this way? Of course not! But this attitude, clearly from the standpoint of James under the inspiration of the Spirit, is common among the rich.

Were her words, "blasphemous?" And I would have to say they were. Blasphemy is the intentional and defiant dishonoring of the nature, name, or work of God by word or action. The rich, in the time of James, clearly were also involved in these kind of blasphemous expressions.

In the passage that we are looking at this morning, James says that the rich blaspheme the "**fair name by which you have been called.**" The fair name is most probably referring to the name of Jesus. And how does James describe this name? He describes the name as "fair" (KALON) which means, "beautiful, honorable, excellent." The choice of this word highlights the disgracefulness of the blasphemy from the standpoint of James and which he assumes his readers would agree. Why? Because Christians belong to Christ.

The expression, "**by which you have been called**" is a Hebraism denoting that they belong to the one whose name they wear. In **Deut. 28:10** we read, "**So all the peoples of the earth shall see that you (Israel) are called by the name of the Lord; and they shall be afraid of you.**"

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Or in other words, “All the peoples of the earth shall see that Israel belongs to the Lord.” Another passage that is more familiar to us is in **2 Chron. 7:14**, “**And My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.**” How does this verse begin, “**And my people who are called by my name.**” Those who are called by His name what? His people and belong to Him.

Please note: Some people have taken this verse as a promise to America. This cannot be done. This is not talking to America. This passage was talking to the nation of Israel as they were taking possession of the land God promised to them. America can in no way be described as God-chosen people and there is no promise to us from the Lord about the future of our land in respect to us.

Going back to the passage in front of us this weekend I believe it is very easy to see why James would be shocked by their behavior in light of their personal experience with the rich. He sees that to give the rich preferential treatment is totally inconsistent. And as such not only would it seem futile but it would be disgusting in light of their blasphemies.

CONCLUSION

James in the passage before us, in addressing the sin of personal favoritism, has given us the principle in V. 1, the example in VV. 2-4, and now the inconsistency in VV. 5-7. But how can we avoid becoming caught up in making distinctions on the basis of outward appearances for personal gain?

Look at **V. 8**, “**If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.**” We can avoid the sin of personal favoritism through love. We can avoid the sin of personal favoritism by focusing not on being served but on serving.

For example: There may be new visitors with us this morning who are looking for a church home. Let me ask you a question. Could it be possible for a new visitor who is looking for a church home, to be guilty of personal favoritism or partiality in the way they go about making their choice? I believe it can be done.

If a person comes into this fellowship and approaches the decision from the standpoint of how will this church serve me and my family and that alone is the basis of their decision, they will invariably make distinctions on the basis of outward appearance for personal gain and benefit. They will make the decision on the basis of whether a church has a choir or doesn't have a choir. They will make the decision on the basis of whether the preacher is entertaining or not entertaining. They will make a decision on the basis of whether they have a nursery or don't have a nursery. They will be making the decision totally on the basis of what they perceive serves them. This might seem reasonable from the standpoint of the world but it is not reasonable from the standpoint of a follower of Christ. Just as Jesus did not come to be ministered unto but to minister, so must we.

, It is the believer who, in all of his decisions, is seeking to love his neighbor as himself who will not be guilty of the sin of personal favoritism on a personal level, a group level or a church level.