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## WHY PARTIALITY IS WRONG

(Part 1)

James 2:1-7

By

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June 12, 2005

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June 12, 2005  
James Lesson 8

## Why Partiality is Wrong (Part 1) James 2:1-7

When he was a student, the famous Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, considered becoming a Christian. He read the Gospels and was moved by them. It seemed to him that Christianity offered a solution to the caste system that plagued the people of India.

One Sunday, he went to a local church. He had decided to see the pastor and ask for instruction on the way of salvation. But when he entered the church, which consisted of white people, the ushers refused to give him a seat. They told him to go and worship with his own people. He left and never went back. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu" (from "Our Daily Bread," [Feb., 1979]).

That tragic story illustrates the sin that James writes against in our text. His focus is on the sin of showing favoritism to the rich and despising the poor, but his words apply to all types of prejudice, whether it is based on economic status, race, or anything else. To favor some people and to disregard others based on outward factors is a terrible sin that plagued the early church in James' day. It has plagued the church in every generation, because it stems from pride, which is endemic to our fallen hearts.

I recently read *The Bad Popes* (by E. R. Chamberlin [Barnes & Noble]), a history of the worst of the Roman Catholic popes. The word *corrupt* is not strong enough to convey how evil these men were! They were into total power and they dispensed favors based on who could pay them the most or who would consolidate their power over their enemies. They epitomized the sin of partiality.

But we don't need to turn to the Roman Catholic Church for examples of violations of James' commands. The sin of partiality has persisted in often subtle, but sometimes blatant, ways in evangelical churches as well. For example, one tenet of the church growth movement is called, "the homogeneous unit principle." It is based on the observation that people like to worship with "their own kind." Thus, we need to target our outreach programs and

build our churches with the aim of reaching similar segments of society. So these folks try to “market” the church to the Baby Boomers or to the Generation Xers, each with their own demographic preferences. I’ve even heard of churches aiming at the up-and-outers, the rich who seem to have everything but God!

Probably such specialized churches would not deliberately exclude anyone who didn’t fit their target audience, but neither would they go out of their way to make such folks feel comfortable. They define their niche and do everything to shape the “product” (the church) to appeal to that niche.

All such approaches violate what James is saying here and they ignore the glory of the New Testament church, “in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). The makeup of the local church should baffle the world. The world should not be able to explain how people of different races, economic and social levels, and age groups can come together in love and harmony. To divide up the church along such lines obliterates the glory of God and His salvation!

James’ argument runs from 2:1 through 2:13. He gives three reasons why partiality is wrong. For sake of time we can only deal this time with the first two (2:1-7).

Partiality is wrong because it usurps God’s sovereignty,  
it aligns you with God’s enemies,  
and it violates God’s law of love.

1. Partiality is wrong because it usurps God’s sovereignty (2:1-5).

James again addresses his readers as “my brethren” (1:2, 16, 19; 2:5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9-10, 12, 19). This shows that he is writing to professing Christians, not to the world. It reveals James’ pastoral concern for them and it reminds them (and us) that we are brothers and sisters in the family of God. This is further underscored by James’ mention of “your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” It is faith in Christ that brings us all, whatever our backgrounds, into God’s family as brethren. When James says, “do not,” the Greek construction has the nuance, “Stop doing it.” James had already observed this sinful practice taking place. He is

writing to correct a problem before it grows worse. He shows two ways that partiality usurps God's sovereignty:

- A. Partiality puts man as judge in the place of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ (2:1-4).

James opens with the command, that we not hold our "faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism." Then he illustrates it with a hypothetical scenario. Two men come into a church gathering (here called "synagogue," a carryover from their recent Jewish roots). One is obviously wealthy, as seen by his gold ring and fine clothes. The other is obviously poor, as seen by his shabby clothes. Someone in the church directs the wealthy man to the best seat in the house, whereas the poor man is told to stand out of the way, or to sit down on the floor. The rich man is given privileges because of his wealth, but the poor man is despised because of his poverty. Such treatment, James says, is evil.

Scholars debate over exactly how to translate the word "glorious." The New King James Bible, for example, translates it as "*the Lord* of glory." But however it is translated, it refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, ascribing to Him an attribute of God. James was familiar with Isaiah 42:8, where God says, "I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images." It would be idolatry to ascribe glory to a creature. Thus when James refers to the Lord Jesus Christ as "glorious," he is ascribing deity to Him.

This is one of only two references to Jesus Christ by name in this entire epistle (see 1:1), and so it should capture our attention. By focusing our attention on Jesus Christ in His glory, James addresses the problem of favoritism in two ways.

First, he gets us to see how petty our distinctions between the rich and poor (or any other distinctions) really are. Even the most powerfully rich men on earth are nothing compared to the glory of Jesus Christ, the King of kings. King Nebuchadnezzar thought that he was great, but God humbled him so that he ate grass like a beast of the field. When he came to his senses, he acknowledged that God alone is great (see Daniel 4, esp. vv. 34-37).

When we exalt men on account of their wealth or power or status, we rob glory from Jesus Christ, who sovereignly gives us

everything that we are and have (1 Cor. 4:7). Rather than exalting the rich, we should exalt the supreme glory of Christ alone. We all are just His unworthy servants. Focusing on the glory of Christ puts us all in our proper place before Him. Of course we should grant honor to whom honor is due (Rom. 13:7), but honor toward Christ and honor toward men are on two different planes.

Second, when James ascribes glory to the Lord Jesus Christ, it probably points to His coming in power and glory to judge the earth (Matt. 26:64; Peter Davids, *Commentary on James* [Eerdmans], p. 107). James will mention judgment at the end of his argument (2:12-13). In 2:4, he says that when we make distinctions among people based on outward factors, we set ourselves up as judges with evil motives (or, thoughts). We don't see the hearts of men, as God does (1 Sam. 16:7). To judge a man based on his outward appearance is to usurp the place of Jesus Christ in His glory as judge of all the earth.

We would be mistaken to conclude that James is saying that the rich are categorically bad and the poor are categorically good. Some rich men are very godly and some poor men are very evil. But James' point is that any judgments based on outward factors alone are wrong judgments, because they do not discern the heart. Only God can judge the heart, and so we are wrong to usurp His place as judge.

B. Partiality puts man as sovereign in the place of God who chooses (2:5).

James asks his readers to pay attention ("Listen"). He again addresses them as "my beloved brethren," and then asks a question that expects an affirmative answer: "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?" Note the following:

First, the New Testament writers consistently assume that God chooses those who are saved apart from any merit or qualifications on the part of those chosen. Salvation is not offered to anyone on the basis of anything that God sees or foresees in that person. He does not choose the rich man to get his money for the kingdom. God does not choose the poor man because of his poverty. God does not choose those whom He foresees will one day

trust in Him, because that would make salvation depend on something that originates in fallen man. God's choice is completely based on His grace and purpose (Rom. 9:11-16).

James does not stop here to explain or defend the doctrine of God's sovereign election. He assumes that his readers know and believe this, and so he uses it as a reason why they are wrong to favor the rich and despise the poor. When they do this, they align themselves opposite to God, who often chooses the poor to be rich in faith and leaves the rich to perish along with their wealth (James 5:1-6).

James is not teaching that God chooses all poor men for salvation and passes over all rich men. Rather, it was obvious in the early church that many more poor people had trusted in Christ for salvation, as compared to the rich. There were some rich people (Zaccheus, Nicodemus, Barnabas, Philemon, etc.), but the numbers were slanted toward the poor. That's why Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:26-29),

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.

Although there is no merit inherent in poverty, poor people often realize how short life is and thus see their need for eternal life more readily than the rich do. As Jesus explained after the encounter with the rich young ruler, it is hard for the wealthy to get into God's kingdom, because their riches usurp the place that belongs to God alone (Mark 10:17-27). It is those who are poor materially who are also often poor in spirit, recognizing their need for God's grace (Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20). When God sent His Son to this earth, He chose a poor Jewish maiden to be His mother. Mary exulted (Luke 1:52-53), "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent away the rich empty-handed."

By choosing those whom the world rejects and despises, God magnifies the riches of His grace. When James says that God chooses the poor “to be rich in faith,” he means, rich in the sphere of faith. They have spiritual riches in Christ through God’s sovereign, gracious choice, which brought them to faith in Him (as Paul argues in Eph. 1:3-14). God’s choice makes them “heirs of the kingdom” (James 1:5). At the moment of salvation, they come under the reign of Christ in their hearts (Col. 1:13-14), but there remains in the future the fullness of that kingdom and its blessings, when Jesus returns in power and glory (Matt. 25:31-34).

When James says that God promised the kingdom “to those who love Him” (1:5), he is describing the *result* of salvation, not the means to it. Salvation is completely by God’s grace and is received by faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). But when God lavishes His grace on us, we respond by loving Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:7-10, 19).

So James’ first argument is that partiality toward the rich and against the poor (or, partiality based on any external factors) is wrong because it puts us in the place of judge and it puts us in the place of God who chooses. By showing favoritism, we usurp the role that belongs to God alone, who makes sovereign choices.

2. Partiality is wrong because it aligns you with God’s enemies (2:6-7).

James states that by making distinctions based on outward factors, the church has dishonored the poor man. Then he asks two rhetorical questions, based on their current circumstances, to show that by aligning themselves with the rich against the poor, they are siding with God’s enemies, who are also their own enemies. Again, we must keep in mind that James is speaking here in generalities. There were, no doubt, honest, considerate men of wealth, just as there were poor scoundrels.

James is not teaching that the church should ignore or despise the rich because of their riches. That would be reverse discrimination! The church should show God’s love and grace to all, whether rich or poor. Rather, he is saying that the rich should not be given preferential treatment, to the detriment of the poor, in an attempt to court their money or influence. James makes two points:

- A. God's enemies use their strength to oppress the poor, whereas God is concerned for justice for the poor (2:6).

He asks a question that required an affirmative answer, "Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?" Because of greed and selfishness, in every culture and age, the wealthy tend to take advantage of those who are helplessly poor. Even though the rich man does not need the money, he forecloses on the poor person's property to collect on a debt, or he charges exorbitant interest that the poor person could never hope to repay. Or, he pays pitiful wages that hardly allow a man to feed his family, while the rich man just gets richer.

Also, as William Barclay explains (*Daily Study Bible: the Letters of James & Peter* [Westminster Press], p. 67), "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." That's what James is describing here. It is not wealth that James is condemning, but a lack of compassion and understanding on the part of the wealthy towards the poor.

The Old Testament repeatedly emphasizes that God is concerned for the rights of the poor. The wicked Queen Jezebel hired false witnesses to accuse Naboth and execute him. Then she seized his property, just because her pouting husband wanted it for a vegetable garden. Because of this, God pronounced severe judgment on Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 21:1-24). The law stipulated that Israel appoint those who judge the people righteously (Deut. 16:18, 20; Ps. 82:3-4). Merchants were commanded to have full, just weights and measures (Deut. 25:15). Bribery was condemned (1 Sam. 8:3; Ps. 15:5; 26:10; Amos 5:12).

The prophets often confront Israel for oppressing the poor, especially orphans and widows (Isa. 1:17; Jer. 22:15-16; Ezek. 22:7; Amos 4:1; 5:15, 24). Sodom was condemned because she "had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy" (Ezek. 16:49). In the New Testament, Paul exhorts (Col. 4:1), "Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven."

So James' point is that if you give preferential treatment to the rich man who oppresses the poor, you're aligning yourself with

God's enemies. John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], pp. 303-304) compares it to honoring your executioners and injuring your own friends!

B. God's enemies blaspheme the name of Christ by which Christians have been called (2:7).

James' second rhetorical question is, "Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?" The literal rendering, "which has been called upon you" (NASB, margin) refers to the practice of a wife taking her husband's name, or a child taking on the name of his father. Christians take the name of their Savior, Jesus Christ. We don't know the specific situation here. Douglas Moo (*The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 109) suggests that it could have been the Gentiles mocking the Christians' God, or the Jews criticizing the Christian claims about Jesus. It may refer to unbelievers making fun of Christian morality or worship.

William Barclay (*ibid.*, pp. 67-68) suggests that the wealthy slave owners may have insulted their Christian slaves or the slaves' new Lord and Master because of several reasons. The believing slave would have a new sense of independence, and thus no longer cringe at his master's power. He would have a new sense of honesty, and thus not go along with his master's dishonest practices. He would have a new sense of priorities, and thus insist on leaving work aside so that he could worship with his fellow believers. These and other reasons would cause these rich unbelievers to blaspheme the name of Christ and those who followed Him.

So, again, James' point is that showing partiality to the rich is wrong, because you align yourself with those who despise God. He is not saying that all rich people do this, but is making generalizations. But, why court the favor of those who oppose God?

### Conclusion

There are many ways that we can fall into the sin that James is warning us against here. I was once at a breakfast to raise funds for and to honor Billy Graham. He was not present, but his wife was there. They had on the platform a famous movie star, who supposedly had become a Christian. The guy told an off-color joke, and almost everyone present, not knowing what to do, laughed. I was

shocked, but I thought, "That's what you get when you court the influence of the world!"

When I was in seminary, Marla and I attended a church that was heavily slanted toward the wealthy. Our 1968 Mustang, which was only eight-years-old at the time, stood out like a sore thumb in the parking lot! In our couples class, there was one couple from Colorado that didn't fit in culturally with the suit and tie crowd. I deliberately dressed down, not wearing a coat and tie, to try to make this couple feel more accepted. Once after I had taught the class without my uniform on, the elders called me in and reprimanded me for not dressing properly! I confronted them with violating James 2, and they were taken aback that I had a biblical reason for what I was doing. I still believe that by their attire, they were inadvertently catering to the rich and excluding the poor.

One other example: I heard about a church where a wealthy attorney, who was on the elder board, was having an affair. When the other elders confronted his sin and asked him to step off the board, he threatened to sue the church unless they all resigned, in order to save him from disgrace. Sadly, they capitulated. They were showing partiality to the rich and powerful.

Let's apply this by showing love to every person and partiality to none. When our Lord returns, we will hear Him say (Matt. 25:34-40),

"Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me."

Then the righteous will answer Him, "Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?"

The King will answer and say to them, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me."

## Application Questions

1. Many erroneously think, based on Matthew 7:1, that all judgments are wrong. Why is this view wrong (see Matt. 7:6, 15)?
2. Where is the boundary between godly discernment (which we all need) and ungodly judgment (which is sin)?
3. Should we indiscriminately give to the poor, or should we use godly discernment? For example, Proverbs uniformly mocks the man who is poor because he is lazy or foolish.
4. Often the rich got rich because they are wise and disciplined. The poor are often poor because they are foolish and undisciplined. How does this fit with James' theology?

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