

Pathways to Preaching

a publication of the Lutheran Study Centre at Sabah Theological Seminary

Living by God's Values Rather than Human Ones

Written by:

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Text: James 2:1-13 (NRSV)

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

11 For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you 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 without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

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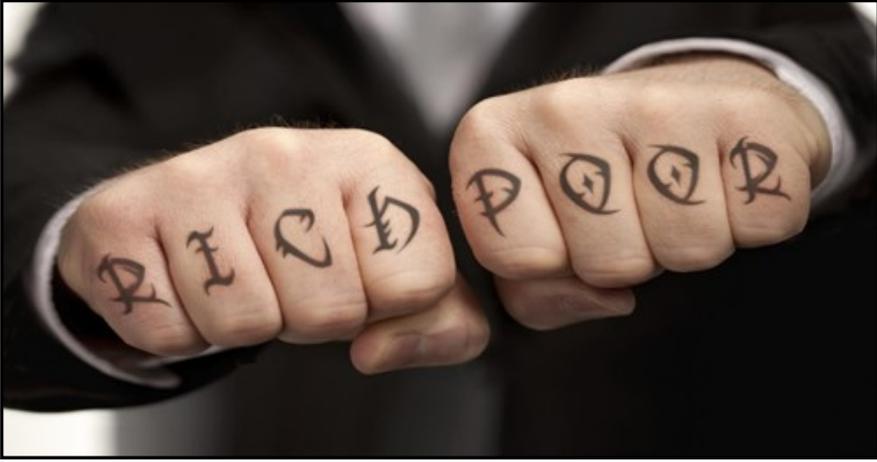
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Overview:

It is not clear the precise historical situation that the Epistle of James addresses. There have been a range of theories, but the text itself does not give a clear answer to whom the letter is addressed. James is addressing a congregation that most likely comes from a Jewish background. It would also seem to be an economically mixed group. Biblical scholar Peter H. Davids suggests that the epistle of James is addressed to a congregation in a Palestinian city in the late 40s or early 50s (Davids, 28-34).

Whatever the exact situation, it is clear that James is addressing a congregation that has significant tension within its important part of it means to be Christian. Recalling gathering with a an important nity of Jesus' life the vision of a nity found in the To be a follower of his life and teach-



midst. A particularly that tension is what righteous as a that this is likely a Jewish background, theme is the conti- and teaching with righteous commu- Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is to draw on ings as an example of righteous living, and that example is rooted in the commands given by God in the Hebrew scriptural writings. Central to this example is care for the poor and the obligation to defend those who are poor from their oppressors. This issue seems to be a particularly relevant one to the tensions in the congregation that James addresses.

Chapter two of James delves into the issues of the rich and the poor in relation to the Hebrew Scriptures. James 2:1-4 sets up the current issue of giving preference to the rich over the poor, which leads to a call to obedience to God's commands in James 2:5-13.



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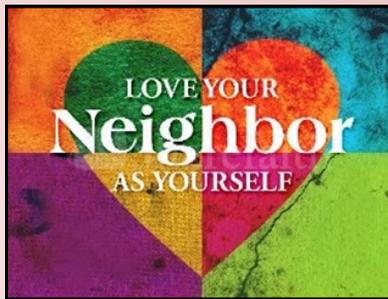
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Law:

James is clearly naming the sin that he sees within the congregation that he is addressing. He tells them that their actions do not align with having faith in Jesus Christ. They are creating distinctions that Jesus did not make in his earthly ministry. They are failing to take seriously both the letter of God's law and the spirit of that law.

The description of being a good neighbor found in Leviticus 19 stands behind James' concerns. In that verse, God's command is to avoid judgment based on whether someone is rich or poor, but rather deal with the neighbor justly. This point comes to its fullest expression in Lev. 19:18, where the LORD declares the command to love one's neighbor as oneself. James considers this command to be integral to having a living



faith in Christ.

James' criticism of the congregation is that they have a double standard. This manifests itself in two ways. The first is towards those who enter the assembly. The one who is rich has great social status and wears fine clothes is given a seat of honor and lifted up as important. The poor visitor is left on the edges and treated as unimportant. This is a violation of the Leviticus commandment but also goes against Jesus' teaching. Jesus frequently spoke of welcoming the poor, such as the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) or the sheep and the goats (especially Matthew 25:40). This failure to follow Jesus' example points to the second, internal manifestation of a double standard. The assembly claims to believe and follow Jesus, and yet fails to live in the way that he showed or value the things that he values.



The assembled congregation has, in short, accepted the values of the world rather than the values of God, even as they claim to be the church of Jesus Christ. They value the world's judgments about who is important, feeling that the rich person is of greater value than the poor person. They evaluate people based on clothing and appearance rather than through God's command. Indeed, this way of thinking runs so deeply that they ignore not only theological commands but also a practical reason. It would seem that the rich visitor is one who has dishonored Jesus' name and taken members of the church community to court, and yet they still treat this person with highest honors. One who automatically favors the wealthy has failed to heed the command to love one's neighbor, the poor, and so is a lawbreaker. Thus James argues that breaking part of the law means breaking the whole law, indicating that those who show partiality have violated God's law and fallen into sin.

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Gospel:

James tells the assembly that God does not follow human logic in what is honorable and what is shameful. God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs to the kingdom of God. In this, he is echoing Jesus' preaching. For instance, in the Sermon on the Plain in Luke, Jesus declares "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (Luke 6:20) In other words, it is not that God is simply impartial. That is God's command to us in Leviticus 19, to show no partiality but rather to treat others with justice. Yet God does favor some over others. God favors the poor. God has made the poor the heirs to the kingdom. God honors what the world dishonors.

Looking At His Disciples
He said

*Blessed Are You Who
Are Poor for Yours is
The Kingdom of God*

When James speaks likely that he means the ex- to be talking about those their own, but rather must only dirty rags to wear. They osity of others. These are the ple in society, and yet James ones that God has chosen to simply James' point of view; choice for the poor is central life and teachings. Jesus not the kingdom belonging to the the destitute and dishonored



Jesus lived this vision of the kingdom of God.

of "the poor," it is most tremely poor. He seems who have nothing of beg for food and have must trust in the gener- most dishonored peo- insists that they are the be first. This is not understanding God's to understanding Jesus' only preached about poor but lived as one of members of society.

This is gospel because it tells us how God acts in the world. God does not act based on the human understandings of value. God does not judge based on our ability to be independent and free from reliance on other people. God does not judge us based on our ability to earn the respect of other people, such as through obtaining wealth or wearing the best clothing. God judges based on whether a person is willing to trust that God will provide what is needed rather than in their own ability to be self-sufficient. God judges based on compassion and willingness to be in a caring relationship with others. These are not human measurements of success or accomplishments, but instead are expressions of God being at the center of one's life.

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Transformation:

James speaks clearly about the importance of following the law found in the Torah. He insists that we are accountable to the whole of the law; to fail at one point is to fail the whole law. Yet we see that James understands the law to be a law of love and mercy. That is, we are not to see Leviticus 19 as a checklist of our moral obligations that we must be sure that we have fulfilled. Rather, the passages of the Hebrew Scriptures where God gives the law should be seen as an expression of God's love. God loves us and wants us to love our neighbors. Love is never general but always expressed through specific actions and commitments. Thus the law gives us specific directions for what love looks like, so that we may express God's love in our lives.

In other words, the implicit call that James brings to us is to re-orient our thinking. We are to change from making judgments of how to treat people based on human criteria of wealth or appearance to make them based on how best to love those people. The law, then, helps us to see that love of the neighbor is about honoring those who are dishonored by the world. To do this is to reflect the life and love that Jesus showed in his ministry. When the law becomes a way to see how to love others, it is a work of the Holy Spirit leading us to follow Christ in bringing compassion to the world.

Theological Reflection:

This section of James highlights the centrality of being people of compassion and trust as central to our Christian identity as followers of Christ. To be people of compassion means to set aside the hierarchies of this world and attend to the hierarchy of the kingdom of God. In God's inverted kingdom, the poor are the favored ones. They are to be given the highest honor.



While this division of rich and poor was the leading social issue within the context that James addresses, we can use this way of seeing to address different contexts. God's command is to love one's neighbor as oneself. People who are oppressed and marginalized are those upon whom God's special concern falls because the world only gives them hatred rather than love. Thus God lifts up the lowly and calls on us to do the same. This includes the poor, but there are other groups that are also frequently oppressed or marginalized in some communities. Frequently women, for example, are discounted and treated shamefully. This is a human hierarchy which, if followed, causes us to fail to love our neighbor and thus become lawbreakers. From this passage, we can conclude that in this situation God is partial to women over men.

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Theological Reflection (Continued from page 5)

To honor women and to work to improve their situation and status is to be people of compassion moved by the Holy Spirit.

The call to honor the dishonored poor also reminds us that trusting in God is the height of faith. Those who are destitute rely on others for all things; in the same way, we are called to trust in God fully. Wealth can lead to ego, where we trust our own abilities to live righteously. To be people of trust means to trust the teachings of Jesus and the leading of the Holy Spirit in believing that the values of this world would lead to destruction, while the values of the kingdom of God lead to life. This world values wealth, prestige, comfort, and honor. God values compassion, trust, relationship, those who struggle, and those that this world shames. Faith is known in allowing God to change our vision from seeing through the eyes of this world to seeing through the eyes of God's kingdom.



What Theologians Say:

"For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish." Martin Luther, *Two Kinds of Righteousness*.

Prayer

Father, forgive us for the many times we have been self-centred, not looking to the needs of our poor and oppressed people in our community. Help us to be conscious of their needs and reach out in love and compassion as You did while on earth. Help us to see them through Your eyes. Amen!

Hymns (Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement.
Open Book Publishers.)
853 New Commandment
855 The Servant Song
799 in Christ there is no East or West

Bibliography:

Peter H. Davoids, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, pages 28-34