

James 2:1-7.

Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is the story of a foolish king who had three daughters. Wanting to divide his kingdom among them, Lear said he would reward the daughter who loved him most with the largest third.

Two of the king’s daughters were skilled at flattery. Back and forth they lauded their father with praises, expressing great love for him. Sadly, he couldn’t see through their deceit. It was Lear’s youngest daughter who refused to compete. She loved her father and spoke truthfully to him, but he wasn’t moved. He was offended she said so little and gave everything to his other daughters.

Once the kingdom had been turned over, the two daughters who flattered him then rejected him. He came to the painful realization that these two didn’t love him. It was his youngest, the daughter who spoke truthfully, who loved him most.

“WHEN MONEY SPEAKS, THE TRUTH IS SILENT”
— RUSSIAN PROVERB.

Money can be intoxicating. James saw how money had affected some of the churches to whom he wrote. When unbelievers with great means visited their church services to observe, some pandered to them. James confronts, not for kindly welcoming a visitor, but for the sin of partiality. It’s inconsistent with the heart of God.

TWO VISITORS GO TO CHURCH (JAMES 2:1-2)

Was poverty a real problem in the early church? A great one. Early sources such as the *Didache* indicate poverty was widespread among Christians. In fact, immediately after churches were established, believers started sharing what little they had with one another (Acts 2). The first problem ever faced by church leaders involved helping the widows in their midst (Acts 6).

Roman society wasn’t known for its generosity. Without programs to help or tax breaks to encourage charity, the poor were on their own. It was a harsh world for most, which helped strengthen the Jewish communities. These came together to help one another.

As Jewish Christians, James’ audience no longer had help from their former communities. All they had was their local church. It became a new community for them where they could come together and share what little they had. A problem James could see was favoritism. The desire to have more had a real pull on some of these believers.

The story that James tells in these verses may be hypothetical. He mentions two visitors entering a church meeting—one man is poor; the other rich. The rich visitor enters “wearing a gold ring and fine clothing” while the poor man arrives “in shabby clothing” (Jas 2:2). In Roman society, jewelry and clothing indicated status. Though lower classes had jewelry, but the upper classes adorned themselves with it. Men sometimes wore rings on every finger or even stopped on the way to rent additional ones.

As for the visitor wearing a gold ring, the text more literally calls him a “gold-fingered” man. For his fine clothing, James described it with the same words used to describe the attire of angels (Acts 10:30). He was an ostentatious display of wealth, while the poor man was quite the opposite. He was a beggar, in fact. James’ word choice indicates this man knew hunger and starvation. He had nothing in life but the clothes he’s wearing to church. Worse, these were a filthy mess (Jas 2:2).

WHAT HAPPENED? (JAMES 2:3-4)

We have the extremes of society here. First is a rich man who comes to church one Sunday. He’s greeted, and then escorted to a good seat. Jewish churches, like synagogues, had few places to sit. It was an honor to be seated at all (Matt 23:6).

At the other extreme was the poor beggar who wasn’t seated. It seems he stumbled into the church and was told to stand or to “sit down at my feet” (Jas 2:3). More literally: “...sit down beside my footstool.” A footstool? James mentions it to say that believers elevated their feet higher than this man. Sure, they were poor, but this man was much poorer—not even worthy of a footstool.

The poor beggar was welcome to stand or to sit on the floor: *Just get wherever you’re going, buddy.* He wasn’t treated with any dignity or even made to feel welcome. He didn’t belong. And why? Because money spoke that day, and he didn’t have anything anyone wanted (Jas 2:4).

When Money Speaks

ON THE EVILS OF PARTIALITY

(JAMES 2:5-7)

Mark Twain once observed: “Prejudice is the ink with which all history is written.” We evaluate one another on the basis of careers, clothing, cars, education, reputation, home, family, background, race, etc. Those with more money and influence, charisma and success tend to receive special treatment. They have what others want.

The churches to whom James wrote loved rich visitors. Rather than being awestruck by the “Lord of Glory,” he said they were awestruck by men (Jas 2:1). The world may play favorites, but James says it’s so contradictory for a Christian (Jas 2:5-7).

Consider the example of Jesus Christ. Being God, He entered this world in a lowly stable. He even had the ability to select His own ancestry. Of the four women listed in His genealogy: Tamar was a deceiver, Rahab was a prostitute, Ruth was an idolater, and Bathsheba was an adulterer. From the nobility to paupers, the godly to sinners, in His birth, the Lord identified with a sampling of all humanity (Matt 1:1-17). Such remained the case throughout His life and ministry.

God makes no distinctions—neither should those who know him. James develops the thought further. God actually has a heart for the poor. And considering the way the rich treated the poor in Roman society, James asks why in the world God’s people would cater to them.

Throughout Scripture, we find God’s heart for the widow and orphan (Ex 22:22; Psa 68:10, 72:4; Prov 17:5). Though some with great riches have great faith, they aren’t the norm. Riches so easily master a person, diverting his attention away from the Lord and others. Why look to God when one can provide for himself?

Yet, those with very little understand the meaning of “give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11). The poorer a man is, the less he is able to meet his own needs. He can only look upward for help, and doing so, he learns to trust the Lord all the more with each day.

Ours is a nation of great wealth. Compared to Liberia, Mozambique, or Zimbabwe, even our standard of poverty is considered wealthy to them. We forget that. So many people in the world and in history have known real poverty and suffering. God has an affection for them, and He orders rich believers to be generous (1 Tim 6:17-18). Generosity is a test of one’s faith, and the Lord is offended when His own people dishonor the poor (Jas 2:5-6a).

James also knew that the rich used their wealth to litigate Christians. In fact, they were notorious for persecuting the Christians to whom James wrote. Wealthy men dragged believers into court, mocked their faith, and blasphemed the Lord. Now, if that’s the norm, why would James’ audience pander to a rich man likely guilty of all this? That’s James’ question (Jas 2:6b-7).

One could say the church was showing good Christian love and forgiveness. God says it’s partiality. Had the poor beggar been oppressive or blasphemous, the response toward him would have been worse than it already was.

Philippians 2:3—Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

The Bible does advocate one kind of partiality though. It’s to “count others more significant than yourselves.” Consider others more worthy, make yourself a servant to them, strive to elevate your neighbor without regard for his skin color, party affiliation, social status, or wealth.

Men and women are created as the image of God (Gen 1:27). May we learn to view them in this light and minister without concern for what we may receive. Minister out of a simple love for God and for man (Matt 22:39).