

James

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November 16, 2022



James 2:1-4

Vs. 1

- "...an attitude of favoritism" or "respect of persons" points to the practice of undue partiality. As soon as the time around 60 AD when James was writing, the church had become remarkably diverse. The church included not only people from all across the Roman empire but from every social strata as well. There were the very wealthy who often opened their homes to be worship centers. There were civic office holders who often protected the church from her enemies. There were middle class working people. There were the poor. And there were slaves. But the ground at the foot of the cross is always level and in the early it was not uncommon for a slave to be sitting next to a rich man as they shared a meal, unlike any other place in the whole world.
- Social favoritism was a practice condemned throughout the New Testament. Christ is always our example and even His enemies had to admit that He was "no respecter of persons" (Luke 20:21; Matthew 22:16). After Peter's vision in Acts 10, he too understood that everyone is "clean" and acceptable before God. In Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25 and elsewhere, Paul again and again drives home the point that there is no partiality in God. Remember, ALL have sinned and fall short of God's glory. Recall also that social favoritism was a key sin that Amos preached against and indeed is a common thread in all the prophets (Malachi 2:9) as well as in the Law of Moses, Psalms, and Proverbs. "The rich and the poor have a common bond. The Lord is maker of them all" (Proverbs 22:2).

Vss. 2-4

- James then relates a story that it seems he's seen before. The ancients loved their rings and the early church Fathers worked to get wealthier Christians to tone down their bling – one ring instead of ten. Even the one ring, it is likely, would cost more than the poor man could earn in a year or more. Similar stories and instructions are found in ancient books of order that were circulated around the churches.

- The Ethiopia Statutes of the Apostles dates to the 300-400's AD and it states: "If any other man or woman enters in fine clothes, either a man of the district or from other districts, being brethren, thou, presbyter, while thou speakest the word which is concerning God, or while thou hearest or readest, thou shalt not respect persons, nor leave thy ministering to command places for them, but remain quiet, for the brethren shall receive them, and if they have no place for them, the lover of brothers and sisters, will rise, and leave a place for them ... And if a poor man or woman of the district or of other districts should come in and there is no place for them, thou, presbyter, make place for such with all thy heart, even if thou wilt sit on the ground, that there should not be the respecting of the person of man but of God."

- This is the process we call "sanctification", whereby the ways of the world are squeezed out of us, washed from us, where in the end we look no more like the world than Jesus did. The church was literally the only place in the world, inside the empire or beyond it, where social and class distinctions didn't matter. And that was different. It was a new way of thinking, a new way of living, a new way of relating to others. It was The Way. Even a cursory look at the gospels finds Jesus eating and drinking with sinners, touching lepers who were deemed untouchable, talking with a Roman centurion and being willing to go to his home to heal his servant, traveling through Samaria and taking retreats into Lebanon. None of those social taboos mattered to Jesus in the least. For God so loved the whole world...not just the nice parts, not just the parts we like.

- Here then is the unspoken call to repentance. By making those worldly class distinctions, James is saying, we are committing a sin and making ourselves out to be judges. Jesus said we are not to judge, lest we be judged (Matthew 7:1). Here we are guilty of judging a person by outside appearances – clothes, jewelry, shoes, wallet size – none of which means anything in the kingdom of God. God told Samuel that the prophet failed by looking only on the outside, whereas God looks only at the heart.