

No Snobbery Allowed!

- James 2:1-7
- JB Phillips translates this first verse, “Don’t ever attempt, my brothers, to combine snobbery with faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” It’s another test! We have talked for the last two weeks about the three tests to our faith James offers at the end of chapter one: does the truth control our tongue; does the truth impact our compassion; does the truth influence our moral purity? Now, a fourth test: does the truth of God’s Word change our perspective and destroy our tendency toward snobbery or partiality? James clearly sees a disconnect between faith and partiality or favoritism.
- The principle in today’s text is simple. No snobbery allowed. It’s not held out in Scripture as a possibility for believers. The story that illustrates James’ principle is simple, and one with which we can all relate. We have all walked into a place or gathering of some kind where we feel like we don’t belong, where we feel like we don’t measure up. It happens too often in church and James is giving us some vital instruction on how we can be part of the solution to Christian snobbery, and not part of the problem. The principle and the story will be followed by the questions, which give us reasons to separate ourselves from any practice of favoritism or snobbery. Let’s look at each in turn: the principle, the story, and the questions.
- **The Principle**
- James could not be any more straightforward here, could he? “Show no partiality.” What does it mean to show partiality? Let’s understand that it doesn’t mean that we don’t show honor. Last week we recognized three young men in our midst because they serve in the US Navy. We honored them with applause because the Bible says to give honor where it is due. If Governor Pat McCrory happened to visit Antioch today, it would be right and good to honor him, to acknowledge that the governor of our state is here. He is not better than any one of us, but he is in a position that we are to honor. Peter said it clearly: “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (1 Pe. 2:17) But what if the wealthiest businessman in Burlington, whoever that is, decided to visit today. Would we honor him publicly? I hope we would honor him individually, just as we would if anybody visits, rich or poor! But would we make a big deal over him because of his wealth, ask him to stand, list off his achievements in business, give him a standing O? I don’t think we would! Listen. There is no special honor given to someone simply because of his wealth. If we treat someone with more respect because he has money and someone else with less respect because he is poor, we cannot justify our actions. Wealth may earn privilege in many circles, and it certainly wields power in this world system in which we live, but it does not demand honor. Neither does education level. Or social status. Or name. Lane Adams served many years with the Billy Graham association, and told the story of a time when he was pastoring a large church. His wife sat anonymously out in the pews for several weeks next to another woman who never once acknowledged her or greeted her or even looked at her. Then one Sunday the woman found out that this was the pastor’s wife sitting next to her, and suddenly she couldn’t give ENOUGH attention to the woman she had previously ignored.
- No partiality. There is strong biblical precedent for this. Lev 19:15. Proverbs 22:2. That famous story in Acts 10 when Peter learned that all foods are clean, but mostly that all people are the same in God’s eyes. “What God has made clean, do not call common, “ God said to Peter. Later Peter said to Cornelius, a man he would have ignored before this revelation because of his prejudice, said, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him.” (Acts 10:34-35)
- James seals the deal with the beginning and the end of this principle. “Show no partiality” is the principle and on either side are the phrases that control the no partiality principle: “My brothers” (or, brothers and sisters) and “the Lord of glory.” Brothers and sisters are equal, right? They have the exact same standing before God, which prevents them from being able to look down their

noses at any other brother or sister, who also has the same standing with them. And the most powerful proof that we cannot afford to be snobs? “The Lord of glory.” The glory of God is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” (2 Cor. 8:9)

- Christ is the Lord of glory, and we honor Him as supreme. He is the Lord of glory so we put our eyes on Him, not on the wealthy or the powerful or the popular. If we are gripped by His grace and captivated by His glory, how can we be mesmerized by a mere man wearing a gold ring and fine clothes? Especially in light of His glory that has reversed our own fortunes and made us the wealthiest people in the world, rich in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, who paid the highest price to make us His own sons and daughters!
- **The Story**
- The story is as straightforward as the principle, isn't it? Kent Hughes puts it into more modern terms in which a woman who was from “the other side of the tracks,” as he put it, visited a church for several weeks. She may have wondered why no one ever spoke to her or welcomed her, but she liked the church anyway and decided she wanted to join, and told the pastor so. He told her to go and think about it for a week. She did and came back and told him she wanted to join and he said, “Let's not be hasty. Go home and read your Bible every day for an hour, and come back next week and see if you still want to join.” She did. And came the next week wanting to join. He said, “Let's do one more thing. Go home and pray every day this week, asking the Lord if he wants you to come into this fellowship.” The pastor didn't see her after that for six months. Then one day he saw her on the street and asked why she never came back. She said, “Oh, I did what you suggested. I prayed every day for a week, and one day while I was praying the Lord said to me, ‘Don't worry about not getting into that church. I've been trying to get into it myself for the last twenty years!’”
- Remember as we have said before, James was writing to mostly poor Christians. Because that's what there were a lot of. There was no middle class then in most of the world. Like many parts of the third world today, there were a great number of desperately poor people, and a small number of exceptionally rich. And perhaps James had heard of it, or even witnessed it, where a rich person is greeted warmly and with great respect, and then ushered to the “best seat” in the church, while the poor man, dressed in shabby clothes, is told to stand or, “if you must sit, then sit on the floor.” James makes it clear that whenever we do this, we make distinctions among ourselves that are not biblical, not godly, and we become judges with evil thoughts!
- How does this apply to us? The question James is asking us to consider is this: does our reaction change depending on who walks in the door on Sunday morning? To show partiality means literally to “receive the face.” In other words, to accept or reject a person based on outward appearance. Or worldly goods. To make distinctions among ourselves. Our tendency may be to see the clothes and the car and the house and the lifestyle, and to honor someone based on those things. I know people, and so do you, who are always talking about worldly possessions, looking with admiration and envy at those who have them. We must not do that, and if we allow that thinking in the church, we are headed for trouble. It is sad but true that too many churches do this especially with leadership. A rich man is made an elder not because he has the spiritual qualifications but because he has a pocketful of cash. God help that church! (By the way, we can say with confidence that none of the three young men who are becoming elders today has a pocketful of cash. But they have the biblical qualifications, and that's what matters!) You see, when the world values wealth and status, the church does not, because God has turned that upside down in Christ! As Mary said prophetically of her Son to be born, “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.” (Luke 1:52-53)

- We are to see everyone with the eyes that Christ gives us through faith in Him. We are to be like God, who is not a respecter of persons. Judging a brother or sister because of their social status or the color of their skin or their accent or their intellectual level or their education or their wealth or anything else that is an external measurement...is to disrespect the person of Jesus Christ who paid for that person with His own blood. The blood that makes us one.
- **The Questions**
- James now asks three rhetorical questions about the rich, to focus the readers' attention on another reason why showing favoritism to the rich is foolishness. And we need to understand that the answer to each question is yes, and no.
- Verse 5: "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?" The answer is certainly, yes. Paul said it in 1 Cor. 1:26, "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." Most followers of Jesus are from humble means, and many from abject poverty. But notice that Paul said, "Not many." He didn't say, "Not any!" So the answer to James' question is yes...and no. The key is the first phrase: "Has not God chosen." Can you name some rich people that God chose to follow Him in the Scriptures? (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, Zaccheus, Levi, Joseph of Arimathea...) It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom, because of his riches! They drag him to his grave. But it is not impossible. Nothing is impossible with the Lord.
- Verse 6: "Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?" Again, the answer is yes...and no. To be rich does not equal oppression. There are many wealthy who work to free the oppressed, and many poor who do all in their power to bring others into bondage. But James is right. Most oppression is power over weakness. That's the way oppression works. Slaves don't often oppress; they are the oppressed. And poor people usually don't take rich people to court; they don't have the means. The rich sometimes get richer through oppression and injustice because of what some call the golden rule. Them that has the gold, rule! Sadly it will always be that way until Jesus comes back and settle all accounts. But it need not be with the church.
- Verse 7: "Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?" Again the answer is yes, and no. The rich who exploit others and use their wealth and power to oppress the poor do indeed blaspheme the name by which we are called. Jesus came to set the captives free. But a person's wealth does not make him evil any more than a person's poverty makes him holy. It is his heart that matters.
- That's what James is most concerned about. The heart. What is in the heart of a Christian who would treat the rich well and look down on the poor? Remember when Jesus was watching people give to the offering box in the temple. And many rich people came through and dumped piles of cash into the box, maybe looking around and receiving the admiring looks and the adulation of the crowd. Jesus was not impressed. Then a little widow lady came and threw in what amounted to a penny. And she wasn't looking around for praise; she didn't know Jesus was watching. And Jesus called His disciples and pointed her out as she shuffled out of the temple. And He said, she gave more than the rich, because they gave out of their abundance, but she gave out of her poverty. She put everything in; all that she had to live on. You see? Jesus wasn't looking at the outside. He was looking at her heart. And ours. We must continue to learn how to do that with one another.