

Respect of Persons
James 1:27-2:13

“Visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction.” Helping widows and orphans, the people in the ancient world who were most helpless, the people who were in the greatest danger of abject poverty – that’s something we American Christians know how to do. So, since last week we heard James’ challenge to be not just hearers but doers of God’s Word, we would expect him to jump right to verses 14 through 16, where he urges us to provide clothes and food for the needy, to put our faith into practice with good works.

But before we rush off to start a food pantry or a soup kitchen, James would have us focus on today’s passage instead. He would have us begin not with action, but with an examination of the way we look at the people we will be serving. He warns us about the “respect of persons,” which is the King James way of saying “showing favoritism.”

Now, James obviously considers this to be a big problem. In verse 9, he says it’s a sin, and in the next verse he challenges us not to let ourselves off the hook, considering favoritism somehow less serious than other sins. No, he says that breaking any part of God’s law is serious. In verse 11, James reminds us that while we may not be the sexually immoral types, sleeping around with all sorts of differing folks, if we are murderers, that’s just as bad. Just so, he says that showing favoritism convicts us of breaking God’s law as surely as if we had killed someone.

Oh, come on, James. Is that really reasonable? Aren’t you setting the bar for Christian behavior way too high? But wait, we need to remember that James is, after all, only repeating the teaching of his big brother, Jesus. When he reminds us in verse 8 that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, he’s just repeating what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. And if we think James’ expectations are unreasonable, remember that it was Jesus who said that it’s not enough to avoid committing physical murder – we must also avoid being angry with others. It was Jesus who said that it wasn’t enough to avoid committing physical adultery – we must also avoid looking lustfully at other people. It was Jesus who showed us that our obedience to the law mustn’t just be outward, but also inward, not just physical, but also spiritual.

So, before we get busy helping the poor, maybe we need to start by examining our true motivations. Why, for example, might we want to show favoritism to wealthy people? What would such a desire tell us about our spiritual condition? Could it be that, no matter what we may say to the contrary, we actually think material things are more important than spiritual ones? Could it be that we tend to cater to the wealthy because we want them to give us some of what they have? And if so, if we really are materialists deep down inside, is that kind of desire really so different from the sort of lust that inspires adultery? Greed may be more socially acceptable, but is it really any more righteous?

And what about the other side of the coin? Why might we tend to look down on poor folks? We might believe that it was their own bad choices that left them in their predicament – and there is some truth to that at times. But if that’s the case, could it be that we consider ourselves to be somehow superior to them? Could we consider poor people to be a nuisance? Could it be that we somehow wish they weren’t here? And is that sort of proud, dismissive attitude really so different from the way that murderers want to erase people from the earth?

Now, I know. None of us are literally murderers. And we don't literally have a problem with the sort of public favoritism James describes in verses 1-4 anymore. Oh, in the days this church was built, how much money church members had made a big difference – in those days people paid their pastors by renting pews – that's why they have numbers on the side. But those numbers have been scratched out – that practice went out of fashion at least in part because of James' admonition.

Today, we know we shouldn't treat rich and poor people differently where it comes to public worship. We know we shouldn't show partiality, or as the King James version puts it, have respect to persons. But charging people pew rents or looking down on folks who don't wear the nicest clothes to church isn't the only way to despise, which means to dishonor, to disrespect the poor, as verse 6 puts it. In fact, it's possible to disrespect people even while we help them with their physical needs.

For let's face it – folks in Southwest Mississippi know a lot about poverty. Economists and sociologists may talk about structural unemployment and the presence of an underclass in America, they may debate the relative merits of allowing large numbers of unskilled workers to immigrate to this country, but we live in this reality every day. And we know that poverty is complicated. We know that, even though some people are poor because of selfish or impulsive decisions they have made, we also know that many children grow up in poverty without having made any of those choices. We know that it's possible to be the victim of generational poverty, even while repeating the bad decisions that in turn victimize the next generation.

And we do try to help in lots of different ways. We give money or food to beggars on the street. We contribute to food pantries and clothes closets. We host work teams who repair houses for those who can't afford a decent place to live.

But as we give and as we help, do we have respect to persons? Do we show favoritism? Do we give out of a sense of pride or guilt, or do we give with the kind of love James talks about in verse 8? Instead of having respect to persons, do we show true respect, true honor to those we are trying to help? And if not, is our pride undermining the witness of our generosity?

It is possible to send such mixed messages, you know. For well over a hundred years, the Western church sent missionaries to what they considered to be less civilized, barbarous parts of the world. These missionaries assumed that they knew what was best for the indigenous peoples to whom they ministered. And while they were right to try to stamp out many of the brutal superstitions that accompany pagan beliefs, they also urged tropical people to wear layers of European clothing in the name of modesty, and to replace their own musical traditions with organs and Western melodies. And as a result, in far too many areas, the Christian faith and European culture became so intertwined that many indigenous people rejected Jesus, not for religious but for cultural reasons. They couldn't reconcile the Christ who died for them with Christians who treated them with such proud disdain.

Today, missiologists tell us that cross-cultural ministry works best in partnership. Partnership means that instead of swooping in with our resources and our answers, we come with our questions. Instead of assuming that we know best, we honor those we seek to help by asking them what projects they are involved with, and how we can help them. We earn trust by participating in their plans, and only then make suggestions. We build relationships, and only then share the Christ whose love compels us to share His story.

And partnerships aren't just for overseas missionaries. Our summer workgroup from Kalamazoo, Michigan and Jackson, Tennessee started out putting on a VBS in a park in Hermanville. Then, they formed a partnership with First Baptist Church. The VBS has grown, and First Baptist is able to provide continuing support to the children all year long. Respectful partnership has fueled ministry growth.

Okay, so how about us? We know we need to care for widows and orphans, to help those who are truly helpless. But do we take the time to listen to them before prescribing solutions, or do we just assume that we know what's best for them? Do we really try to learn their stories, or do we just use our gifts as a way to avoid the inconvenience of getting involved? Are we showing respect, or are we sending mixed messages?

For true religion requires more than just giving gifts with a pure heart or even in a respectful way. For isn't it interesting that in the last verse of chapter 1, James tells us to "visit" the helpless. This word comes from the same word as our word "episcopal." We translate the word "bishop," but it really means "overseer," one who looks out for others. In other words, James is telling us we need to do more than give to the needy at arm's length. We simply cannot escape the requirement of active oversight, genuine involvement, looking out for the needs of others.

And once again, James is simply repeating what His big brother said, isn't he? For how did Jesus illustrate the same command James gives us in verse 8? How did Jesus show us what love for our neighbors really means? He told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And whatever else we may say about the Samaritan, he certainly got involved with that crime victim, didn't he? He cleaned the man up, and put him on his donkey and took him to an inn, and paid for his expenses until he got well. He didn't just spend his money on the needy – he spent his time and effort, He went to a lot of trouble. That's what it means to "visit" a helpless person.

And you know what? Luke tells us that God has visited all of us in the same way. When John the Baptist was born, his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and said that John would be the prophet of the Lord, preparing the way of the dayspring from on high who "hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

You know, God could have loved us sinners the way we all too often love the needy around us. He could have stayed in Heaven, thundering commands at us and showering us with blessings only at arm's length. But instead, He visited His people in Jesus Christ. He came down to earth and got involved in our mess. He didn't just tell us the way – He showed us the way. He kept the royal law, the law of liberty by showing mercy to us, giving up His life so that we might live. In that way, as James says in verse 13, mercy rejoiceth against, mercy triumphs over judgment.

And so of course we need to do what Jesus said, loving others in the same sort of selfless, self-sacrificial, hands-on way that the Good Samaritan did. Of course we need to do what James is telling us, showing mercy to the needy, visiting the fatherless and the widows, getting involved with those who are truly helpless. And in the last part of chapter 2, James will get into specific, concrete ways to do just that.

But for now, before we get busy, let's examine our motives. Do we really want to get involved in the problems of helpless people all around us? Do we really love them in the way that we love ourselves, in the way that God loves us? Do we honor, do we respect the needy around us? Or do we have our Christian faith with respect of persons?