

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: In the middle of the third century there was a Christian leader named **Lawrence** who served as one of seven deacons in the Church of Rome. According to tradition, Lawrence was in charge not only of "holy things," (like the Communion chalices and candlesticks), but also the church's treasury and what we would call its mercy fund. He was like the church's CFO.

In Lawrence's day, public opinion had turned against followers of Christ, and one day the prefect of the city asked Lawrence to gather up and give him *"the wealth of the church."* Lawrence sent back a message: *"I do not deny that our Church is rich ... and that no one in the world is richer, not even the emperor I will bring forth all the precious things that belong to Christ, if only you will give me a little time to gather everything together."* The prefect agreed.

Lawrence quietly put the church's funds in other hands and then, for three days, he ran about the city, collecting the Church's treasures. But they were not the sort of treasures the greedy prefect was dreaming of. Instead Lawrence walked through all the alleys and squares of Rome and gathered the church's real treasure—the poor, the disabled, the blind, the homeless, and the lepers. He wrote down their names and lined them up at the entrance to the church. Only then did he seek out the prefect to bring him to the church. *"These are the treasures of the Church of Christ!"* Lawrence declared as he presented the ragged crowd to the astonished prefect. *"Their bodies may not be beautiful, but within these vessels of clay they bear all the treasures of divine grace."* The enraged prefect had him killed; roasted alive, if the legend is true. [PreachingToday.com¹]

- B. There are a lot of churches and church people who would not measure the wealth of their church that way, and that can get us into more serious trouble than Lawrence. We want to be a rich church, people one and all who are blessed by God. Turn to **Jas 2:1-4...** [Cartoonⁱⁱ]

I. BEWARE OF FAVORITISM IN OUR CHURCH. IT WILL BRING OUT THE WORST IN US. (2:1-4)

These days, if a guy comes into church with a gold ring and fine clothes we wonder why he got so dressed up for church! But what if the guy plays for the Bears or the woman's an actress or he's a famous Bible scholar whose books you collect. Maybe the guy's just... so *cool*, or she's so *classy*. Or rich; *really* rich. I've watched each of those people come into church at some point. I'm not sure what other people thought but my heart raced a little. I don't think we can help but notice people like that. *Noticing* isn't really the issue. **But when a church thinks such people make us better or richer or more appealing, then we've got a problem.**

- A. A literal translation of **v.1** would be, "*favoritism must have no place in your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Glory.*" I don't recall the Bible putting the Lord's name like that anywhere else. But the point seems to be, in church the Lord Jesus Christ is the only Glory. No one else gets the spotlight. No one else deserves special attention when Jesus is in the house!
- B. Not only does showing favoritism distract people from the Lord Jesus Christ, but we become guilty of a double-whammy sin. **V.4...** Two interlaced sins:
1. **When we favor the rich over the poor we've made ourselves judges of people in a court where we have no jurisdiction.** *Who made you the judge?*
 2. **The judgment we *do* make is not only faulty; it's evil.** We were not just mistaken; we did a hateful thing. We were corrupt, hoping for a kickback of importance.
- C. There are a lot of different ways we measure status, and wealth vs. poverty is just one. We are all susceptible to playing favorites. It is always wrong, but it is a particular travesty when it happens in church.

Illus.: In his autobiography, **Mahatma Gandhi** wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teaching of Jesus he could find the solution to the

caste system that was dividing the people of India. So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. *“If Christians have caste differences also,”* he said, *“I might as well remain a Hindu.”* [Infosearch]

Jas 2:5-6a... Did you realize that? That God typically chooses the poor to be rich in faith? Most of the Christians we know are pretty comfortable financially so this fact can be obscured for us. He isn't saying that the poor are better or more spiritually people than the rich. He is saying that they are better *positioned* to respond to God. I think we might put it this way: **God prefers the poor because they are often open to his grace.**

When someone who is rich, or influential, or cool comes through our doors, we think that they could really help us out. Help our budget. Help get the word out about what a great church we have. Help make us more important. **Take some of the pressure off!** So we give them some special attention. Whereas we see the poor person and think they're going to be a drain on us. And that's true whether their poverty is financial, physical, or emotional.

Illus.: I keep thinking of a cartoon strip I used to enjoy called *Kudzu*. One character was the preacher, **Rev. Will B. Dunn**. At one point he decided God had called him to minister to the filthy rich. That, I'm afraid, is human nature but it is completely backward. James says:

II. DON'T FAIL TO HONOR THE VERY PEOPLE WHO CAN ENRICH OUR CHURCH (2:5-7)

Illus.: I remember seeing a poster years ago showing a huge mansion. The caption was, *“I've been rich, and I've been poor. Rich is better.”* James actually says *poor* is better! Why?

A. Why is it that the poor have the advantage of being rich in faith? Remember how James began: **1:2-4...** In fact, James said in **1:9**, *“Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.”* Believers rejoice when we face trials because that's when we learn how to think

and act by faith in God. Trouble and pressure, in the hands of Jesus, makes us better people—wiser, kinder, humbler, hope-oriented; people whose words bring grace. So even that rich man who comes to church, if he is to be a believer, will be reduced to poverty in one way or another. He just starts at a disadvantage which the poor man doesn't have.

It is much harder for him or her to get low.

- B. So the person who out of their poverty learns to think and behave by faith in God becomes rich in faith. They're the kind of wealthy people our church needs. In James, being rich in faith isn't believing God for the impossible (which is how we typically characterize strong faith). **The person who is rich in faith acts in godly ways when they're under pressure.** To begin with, they are humble about their sinfulness and their need for God's wisdom. James reminds us of the Proverb that says, "*God opposes the proud but gives grace [favor] to the humble.*" Wouldn't you love to be in a church with people like that? James says that the wisdom that God gives to those who seek it makes them "*pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*" A church with those kinds of people would be rich!
- C. The poor are not only best positioned for wealth now but also for a huge inheritance. **V.5b**, "*to inherit the kingdom promised to those who love him.*" You see someone walk into church and your eyes get big. You nudge your friend and whisper, "*See that woman? You'd never know it by looking at her, but I hear she's going to inherit a kingdom! She's set for life!*"

Notice that God promises the kingdom to "those who love him." People don't inherit God's kingdom because they're poor. They inherit God's kingdom because they love God. And "*We love him because he first loved us.*"

- D. In vv.6-7 James reminds the church that, as a rule, rich people aren't our friends. **Vv.6-7....** The rich have a reputation for exploiting people, for injustice and strong-arming, for demeaning and disrespecting the very God we worship. Rich people, James is saying, have a reputation

for using people and for thinking they're mightier than God. So don't kick them out, but don't assume they ought to be on the Elder Board either!

Well, wait a minute! What if the rich person really wants to know about Jesus? Besides, I have met some poor people that were freeloaders, always angling for a handout. James isn't saying that the poor are better people than the rich. He has said, first, that favoritism is wrong, and second, the God favors the poor for rich faith and his vast inheritance. So what are we supposed to do? Here's what: v.8, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."

III. OUR FAITH HOLDS US ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD'S ROYAL LAW, "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." (2:8-13)

- A. Rich or poor, that law works. Whoever "comes into your meeting," love them. Find them both a good seat, or give them yours. Talk to *both* of them as Jesus would. Do not fawn over the wealthy for it is an unloving thing to do. And do not be condescending to the poor for they are positioned by God to receive wisdom and wealth you cannot see. As someone has said, "*The ground is level at the foot of the cross.*"
- B. Favoritism is so terrible because it breaks the law of love and makes us as guilty as convicts. Vv.9-11... It seems like showing partiality is a relatively small thing—perhaps even expedient—but it breaks God's royal law, putting us in the same cell as adulterers and murderers. This is no spiritual misdemeanor, akin to jaywalking or littering. Showing favoritism is the felony category of sins. So let's keep our record clean! **It doesn't matter if a church has lots of money or influence if its people are outlaws!**
- C. **Vv.12-13** take us into the paradoxes of God's law...
 1. One paradox is that phrase, "the law that gives freedom." We saw the same phrase in **1:25...** Laws don't usually give freedom; they typically restrict freedom for the common good. But this is a law that sets us free to do and be what we couldn't before. This law opens the door to a rich life in Christ.

2. The second paradox is that this law enshrines mercy. Mercy is usually what we plead for when the law has done its work. “*Your honor, I plead for mercy!*” Here, we know what law he’s talking about: “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” **The freedom in that law—both for you and your neighbor—is in the mercy it offers.** God’s love for us is rich in mercy. **Eph 2:4-5** says, “*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*” God’s love is never given to the deserving. There *aren’t* any deserving. God’s love is always rich in mercy and grace. So that’s our legal precedent and that is our only model of love.

When someone comes within the orbit of our church, whether they are rich or poor, we are to love them. It is the Law. **We are to love them with the mercy we ourselves needed and wanted.** Our love forgives and forbears. Our love for each other, rich or poor, “covers a multitude of sins.” We love those whose lives are misshapen, whether by wealth or poverty, ease or suffering, by what’s been given them or by what’s been taken away. **Through Jesus, we bring grace to enrich the impoverished man of wealth, and grace to enrich the beggar.**

Conclusion

We live here among the privileged, and it is a dangerous position for a church to be in. Our grace is not sufficiently tested. Favoritism may lurk unseen. The poor who come through our doors or who traffic through our lives may not have empty pockets. James puts us all on warning.

- Beware of favoritism. It will bring out the worst in us.
- Don’t fail to honor the very people who can enrich our church.
- Our faith holds us accountable to God’s royal law, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

I think a church's stories sometimes define us almost as much as our theology. So I want to tell you a story I told only three months ago. It is the story of what we once were, and what a church home like ours should always be.

Illus.: About 25 years ago, a man named Jim came to church here at VCL. No one knows how he found his way here. He was a Vietnam vet, wounded in mind and heart, who lived alone in near poverty in a trailer in Lake Bluff. He drank too much and didn't take very good care of himself. In fact, because of his drinking and everything he suffered from "abnormal swelling in his body." Puffy and bloated, and not very appealing. But he showed up in church. And that posed a problem, of course because he made folks uncomfortable. I'd have probably felt the same way.

But the pastor at the time—another Pastor Lee—welcomed him. That Pastor Lee and his wife Joyce had Jim for dinner. So did Don and Nancy Molinari. Jim became a Christian. Don gave him a Bible. Jim would come and just sit here alone in this sanctuary because he felt peaceful. He sat around a campfire one night till 3 a.m. listening in amazement to Christians tell their stories

Eventually, Jim volunteered to cut the grass and take care of flowers around here. Problem was, he would do it on Sunday morning before church, and then come into church in his cut-offs, smelling of alcohol and grass and gasoline. He was a challenge and he never really got his life all put together. But people here welcomed him to the table.

Jim died about three years later. Don found him dead in his trailer. And now that humble, blessed brother waits for us and the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. That was a time when Village Church was richer than we realized.

i
Adapted from the following sources: Robert Louis Wilken, The Spirit of Early Christian Thought, (Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 225-226; The Angelus, "St. Lawrence Martyr" (September 1980)

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