

Don't Be A Snob!

The Law of Love . . . Responding to Racism, Classism & Culturalism—Pt 1

James 2:1-7

Introduction

Between the hours and 9:00 am and 1:00 pm, thousands of television commercials are developed and targeted for toddlers and preschool children.

In fact, in recent years, television, video and DVD programming have actually been developed for babies—I learned recently that there is now a cable channel dedicated to infants.

The evidence is fully substantiated—by the age of two a child not only can identify brand names, but desire them over and above non-brand items. By the time he reaches the age of three he will be capable of pressuring his parents to purchase items based on their peer popularity rather than a need for them or even the value of them.

Little children are now telling their parents what automobile to drive, where to go out to eat, where to go to school, what to put in their lunchbox and what to wear while they are there.

This is an education that overpowers their education. Little wonder that more than a billion dollars of advertising funds are spent every year on children below the age of ten.

From automobiles to entertainment to clothing to food, our culture has identified a particular defect in human nature—and then built a network of strategies around manipulating it—it is the desire to not only fit in, but to be viewed as superior.

In short—status is golden. What you have matters more than who you are, and this defect continues to play out in a number of arenas.

You can call it classism—what level of society you belong to; or racism—what nationality

you came from, or culturalism—what it is about you that doesn't fit in around you . . .

It is the Christian who approaches these issues with an entirely different perspective. That's because we understand that God never intended the Bible to adapt to our contemporary culture; He intended the Bible to create a different culture entirely, of thought and action and perspective.

That's why James redefines pure and undefiled religion as a religion that interacts and cares for and administrates the needs of widows and orphans.

In other words, genuine Christianity loves and cares for people that can't earn your compassion—they have nothing to offer you . . . they can't enhance your reputation . . . they don't add anything to your resume or portfolio. Your love and care is a matter of grace.

Now James goes on in chapter two of his letter to scattered Jewish Christians to make another mind-blowing, new-culture-creating statement.

1. The Statement

Notice *verse 1. My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism—or partiality.*

In other words, social cliques and Jesus Christ do not mix. Paul wrote, **God is no respecter of persons (Romans 2:11).**

Jesus Christ was anything but a snob. He never walked around with His nose in the air—after all, He was the Son of God, mind you.

He was as kind to the Samaritan woman at the well as He was to Nicodemus. He was as gracious to the woman who touched the hem of His

garment as He was to Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue. He was as available to blind Bartimaeus as He was to the rich young ruler. He gave the outcasts and untouchables as much an offer of salvation as he did the scribes and Pharisees.ⁱ

His overriding concern was the condition of their soul.ⁱⁱ

James writes here to Christians and effectively says, “Do the same thing . . . think the same way: partiality and Christianity are incompatible.”

It was interesting to discover that the original word translated “*personal favoritism, or partiality*” in *verse 1* is a compound word that *never* occurs outside of Scripture. It was apparently a word developed early in the church.

The words squeezed together to create this word here literally mean, “*the receiving of face*”. It came to refer to attention given to someone based on their face—how attractive they were; it developed into the idea of giving someone attention and favor based on their status, education, race, wealth, rank—regardless of the merits of their character or personality.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Amplified Bible paraphrases *verse 1* to read, “*Stop holding the faith with snobbery.*”

This is one of those culture shifting declarations. Something is going to radically change for the believer who wants to grow up.

I have an article from the Johns Hopkins University Press which highlights the writings of Hesiod—a poet who lived 700 years before Christ—in which he wrote and I quote, “Love those who love you, and help those who help you. Give to those who give to you, never to those who do not.”^{iv}

That isn’t hard to do . . . and that’s the way the world works . . . that’s life . . . get over it. Jesus Christ of course, turned that thinking upside down when He effectively said, “You’ve heard it said that you should do unto others as they do unto you—you’ve been quoting Hesiod for centuries—but I say to you, “*Do unto others what you would like for them to do to you, even if they don’t return the favor.*” (That’s the Amplified version of Matthew 7:12)

Listen, that issue is as real to us in the 21st century as it was in the 1st century. Don’t fall back into classism and racism and culturalism. Don’t bow to status . . . don’t pant after brand names . . . don’t focus on the social register . . . don’t pander to image, don’t focus on appearance . . . because if you do, you will not be able to reform the corresponding

attitudes and actions of partiality . . . prejudice . . . pigeonholing everybody into stratified categories.

Those attitudes and actions are exhibits in a person’s life that he while he may ‘be’ in Christ he is not ‘growing up’ in Christ.

I say that he may be “in Christ” because James is using an imperative that can be translated, “Stop it!” Stop holding your faith in Christ with an attitude of partiality.”^v

James knew full well the problem of prejudice and partiality. The problem in the church he pastored there in Jerusalem was the simple fact that Jews didn’t like Gentiles and vice versa.

Much like the church today has a difficulty overcoming the past and the prejudices between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans; between Taiwanese and mainland Chinese; between Hispanics and blacks and between whites and blacks; between the Japanese and the Chinese, between the Hutu’s and Tutsi tribes of East Africa; between the untouchables and the Brahman castes of India and on and on.

This is ‘receiving someone by their face’—this is favoritism based on status and image and race. Then what happens? Some from every tribe and tongue come to faith in Christ. And they come into the assembly of believers.

They, like everyone before them, may have been redeemed by Christ, but they still entered the church with baggage.

Listen, we all come to church carrying the luggage of our former lives. We import into the church our former education in the world’s perspective on brand names and value judgments. It ultimately transfers onto people that get classified and codified and categorized as ‘who’s-who’ and ‘who’s-not’.

You see, according to James, our unity and acceptance and love has nothing to do with our face, it has everything to do with our faith, but this kind of favoritism was taking place among first century believers, and it wasn’t but a matter of months after 3,000 people came to faith in Christ in Jerusalem, that the very first church division arose and the complaints began to be aired—over what? Over the prejudiced preferential treatment in the church toward Hebrew widows over the second class Grecian widows.

You see, it didn’t take long for people to unpack their baggage in the church sanctuary. It didn’t take long for the church to develop first class seating and coach seating—the Jews were in first class and the Gentiles were back there in coach,

where people sit closer together than they do their own spouses.

I flew coach to New Hampshire this past weekend sitting in coach and I'll tell you, the last time I sat that close to someone, I was proposing marriage!

In fact, all Southwest Airlines had was coach seating—I and the lady next to me took turns alternating between sitting forward and then back, so we could actually breath.

Somebody told me recently that airlines are figuring a way to raise the seats and then bend them downward on both sides so that they can eliminate three inches of width per seat. That's not a seat . . . that's a saddle!

Speaking of seating problems, James moves from his opening statement in verse one to a seating scenario in verse two.

2. The Scenario

Notice the real life scenario in *verse 2. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes* . . . stop just a second—before the usher seats them, get this picture in your mind.

The language of James' scenario indicates that these men come in while the church service is already in progress.

The word translated 'assembly' is actually the word *synagoge* (συναγωγη) from which we get our word, 'synagogue'.

James also uses the word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) translated 'church' in chapter 5—both words refer to an assembly of worshippers—the use of the word 'synagogue' is even more evidence that James was written early in the history of the New Testament Church.^{vi}

So these two men come into the service late—the service has already started—proving this was a Baptist church.

The first man is wearing a gold ring. You need to understand that someone wearing gold rings would be showing off both status and wealth. James is presenting a man of rank and power and money.

James is actually using a word that literally means "gold fingered". The wearing of rings for men and women were common in both the Jewish and Gentile world.

However, a man of wealth would wear rings on his left hand and on every finger. This would be

an ostentatious display of wealth. And if you weren't all that wealthy, there were shops in the 1st Century world where you could rent rings so that you could put on a show of being wealthy.^{vii}

Like renting an expensive car for your high school reunion, which I'm sure you would never do. The Roman philosopher, Seneca, wrote in the 1st Century that wealthy men adorned their fingers with rings and gems arranged on every joint.^{viii}

The church actually addressed this issue in the first century—Clement of Alexandria—a church leader serving about 100 years after James, actually urged Christians to wear only one ring and to keep from such public displays of wealth.

In other words, they had a problem with bling—all the way back in the first century. James also says in *verse 2 that he was wearing fine clothing*.

The word for "fine" is lampra which gives us our word, lamp. It literally translates as clothing that was shining or bright. More than likely he was wearing the shining white garments often worn by wealthy Jews.^{ix}

He comes late to church—maybe on purpose—and he walks into the assembly looking like the gemstone cowboy. This guy is decked out in a way that announces he is wealthy and powerful. He's got status and power and image down to a science—and every head turns.

Then another man comes in—James describes him in *verse 2—and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes*.

James uses a word for poor that we would use of a homeless person. In this scenario, James is obviously creating two polar opposites. It isn't that this poor man doesn't have much money—he has no money; which is a total contrast to Mr. Bling Bling who obviously has money to burn.

By the way, there isn't anything wrong with being rich or poor—in fact, to treat rich people badly is nothing less than reverse discrimination. That's not James' issue at the moment—although it's obvious in this setting that the rich man wants everybody to know it. The point James is about to make is our personal reaction to either man.

Then there's another contrast—their clothing. James says the poor man's clothing was dirty. The word is actually stronger and refers to clothing that is filthy.^x

He can't afford a bath and his clothing hasn't been cleaned in some time—it's probably from the nearest alley or trash bin. He literally

stinks and is obviously beyond being down and out. He is, in the words of one Greek scholar, “dirty, worn and shabby.”

Unlike the first man, he has no connections, he has no money and no status and the worst image and the larger issue is this—he has nothing to benefit the Christians gathered in that assembly.

By the way, he isn’t coming to church to get money. The implication is that he and the rich man are unbelievers who’ve just so happened to come into the assembly to find out what’s going on.

Now watch what happens in *verse 3*. ***And you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool.”***

You pay him special attention. The verb means to stare—to look with admiration—we would say, to gawk. I mean, everybody stops breathing and starts staring. One Greek scholar says this verb has the nuance of covetousness and envy.^{xi}

In other words, everybody is looking at him and saying in their heart—Man, does he have it made . . . what a life . . . I would really like to be a little more like him.

To this day, Greek Orthodox churches in Greece do not have auditoriums filled with pews or chairs. There are some chairs along the walls for the feeble. But there are some benches up front and they are reserved for the prominent guests or wealthy members—in fact, the practice was to rent them out.^{xii}

That practice came over into England and then America where pews had little doors with key locks and you rented your seats. From that rent, the church met its budget, and nobody sat in your seat . . . even that problem is old.

Pastors in early American history made news when they offered to free up the pews and anyone could come.

John Wesley and George Whitfield created a scandal in the 1700’s by preaching in the open fields to the common people—historians talk of these men preaching the gospel to thousands of coal miners at dawn in the fields and their tears of repentance streaming white trails down their coal darkened faces.^{xiii}

They weren’t in church because they didn’t have money to buy or rent a pew—they weren’t considered well connected or respectable.

Can you imagine just 50 years ago a black man couldn’t drink from the same water fountain as

a white man—they didn’t eat in the same restaurants, shop at the same stores, swim in the same pool and they certainly didn’t go to the same church. What a stain on our past history!

I’ve often wondered where the pastors were—where were the expositors and their pulpits—where were men who were governed by the text? And where was James chapter 2? Frankly, it never moved—it was right here in our hands all along!

Do you have any idea how wonderful it is to have white people and black people, folks from India, Mexicans and Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese and Taiwanese all in the same services today?

Listen, may this spirit grow and serve as evidence that cultural norms can be toppled by the truth of the gospel of grace. Amen?

We even have Carolina fans and Duke fans in here. They may not be sitting next to each other, but they’re in the same room.

Now I mentioned earlier that an usher seated these men, becoming the spokesman for the assembly. I need to correct something in order to show you how deeply rooted this problem was.

While James leaves the speaker here in *verse 3* unidentified, he isn’t actually an usher, as we would think of the men who helped you find a seat in here today.

In James day, we know from church history, this usher would have actually been someone appointed to meet visitors and see to their needs including help them find a place in the assembly.

We can’t be sure when the practice got started, but we do know in the early church it was actually the deacons who were assigned by the pastor to be in charge of seating the people and keeping the service free from any disturbance.

In fact, if anyone came in late, the deacons’ job was to write down their name and charge them a fee—okay, I made that part up.

Actually, we know from history that it was the deacon who was assigned to help the latecomer be seated so that the pastor wouldn’t have to interrupt his sermon to direct them to available seats. Also, one early church document revealed, it kept the pastor from being tempted to offer a good seat to any wealthy visitors.^{xiv}

So this isn’t a problem with an unspiritual usher—this is a problem with the character of the church leadership which makes its way to the heart of the congregation and everyone ends up accepting the same image and status and name brand

mentality, showing partiality and favoritism just like the world.

The average church even today could begin their services on Sunday morning by effectively saying, “Now while the instruments play, please stand up and shake hands with at least two people who aren’t in your clique.”

3. The Summary

a. Favoritism is evil

James now provides a summary of this scenario. He writes in *verse 4*. ***Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?***

This is summary of what God thinks about what just happened in church.

First, James says that it is nothing less than sinful thinking. James says how evil it is to come into the assembly and make all these distinctions among you — to create classism in the church. And he just says it—it’s evil. Call it what you will, it’s not right.

Partiality and favoritism isn’t a skin problem, it’s a sin problem.

So the guy with money and connections gets the chief seat while the poor guy gets his clothing even dirtier by having to sit cross legged on the ground—or be forced to stand on his undoubtedly weary feet for the hour long or more worship service.

Listen, the church must be the one place on planet earth where racism and classism are wiped out.^{xv}

The church is the place to demonstrate how to think correctly—how to value others according to God’s culture—not man’s.

Kent Hughes, long time pastor of the Wheaton Bible Church, told the story in his commentary on James of a poor, but committed Christian woman who wanted to join a church near her home where she would be able to walk to services. She showed up and talked to the pastor about it. He wasn’t too happy with how she looked and talked and wasn’t too sure she’d do much for the church. So he told her not to be too hasty, but to go home and read her Bible each day for an hour and see how she felt about the decision after that. She did. A week later she was back and she approached the pastor again. He was a little irritated, but said, “Tell you what, why don’t you go home and pray every day about this decision and ask the Lord if He

really wants you in this fellowship.” He didn’t see her for several months. Finally, one day, he was walking downtown and their paths crossed. He coughed nervously, but asked, “Well, what have you decided?” She said, “Oh, I did what you asked me to do—I went home and prayed every day, 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 in there myself for the last 20 years and they won’t have me either.”^{xvi}

How tragic is it, when the church does in here what the world does out there.

b. Favoritism is contrary to the gospel

James not only condemns this assembly for their sinful attitude, he also challenges the fact that their thinking is contrary to the nature of the gospel.

Notice *verse 5*. ***Listen, my beloved brethren—note this—he’s speaking to believers—did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love him?***

By the way, James is not to be misunderstood here as having shut the door on the wealthy. What he’s effectively saying is that the gospel of Christ is available to the poor.

In fact, the gospel of Christ’s love is especially precious to a poor person who has nothing. To someone who is considered without value, he is amazed that God would grant to him, by faith in Christ, eternal value.

The poor especially are enthralled by the fact that the ground at the foot of the cross is level, and quite frankly, church history can easily demonstrate that comparatively more poor people than rich have responded to the gospel.

The words of James provoked my thinking . . . why is it that poor people around the world—and here in this county—are more interested in the gospel than the wealthy?

Why are the historical movements of Christianity—all the way up to Spurgeon in England, among the blue collar worker than the white collar wealthy?

Perhaps it’s because:

- The poor have little optimism that this life will offer any solution and they long for a better ending;
- The poor have no unrealistic sense of self-importance;
- The poor person more immediately recognizes the gospel is good news;

- The poor are amazed at the idea that God loves them;
- The poor have little if anything to hold them back from embracing Christ;
- The poor anticipate with greater joy the thought of a future with a benevolent sovereign.

Why are not more wealthy individuals coming to Christ?

Perhaps it's because:

- The rich are lured into believing that God is blessing them—they confuse financial security with spiritual security;
- The rich depend on themselves and look down on anything that's free;
- The rich are interested in joining something that will enhance them, not humble them—so the church is not attractive to them;
- The rich aren't intrigued by a heaven that promises some of what they already have;
- Having all their earthly needs met, they fail to consider eternity and their greatest need.

The Apostle Paul put it this way when he wrote, ***“Consider your calling brethren, not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called . . . if you're going to boast about anything, boast in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)***

You got anybody really important in the church over there? Not really . . .

In his newsletter, Leonard Ravenhill tells about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village in England and they walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, “Were any great men born in this village?” The old man replied, “Nope . . . just babies.”

I love the treatment of Eugene Peterson as he paraphrases this text, ***Take a good look, friends . . . I don't see many of "the brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God chose men and women that our culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"? Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:25-27)***

So how can we dare to treat people differently than Jesus Christ treated them? How can

we look down our nose at nobodies when they happen to be God's favorite flavor?

Are we in agreement with the gospel or not? And how do we demonstrate the gospel—even in the assembly—while younger Christians watch?

I mean, if you were sitting in this assembly that James is describing, wouldn't you conclude:

- That the rich man must be more important to the church than the poor man?
- That maybe God likes this guy better because He made him rich.
- Maybe God doesn't like poor people, because the church obviously doesn't either
- Maybe poor people deserve to sit on the floor
- When it comes to the church, like the world, money talks
- It looks like the church leaders are going to cater to the wealthy.^{xvii}

All the above could be learned that day in the seating of two men on a Sunday morning, and the congregation learns how to be spiritual snobs; how to receive people ***because of their face*** and not their faith. According to God, the lessons learned would be sinful thinking and contrary to the gospel.

c. Favoritism doesn't make logical sense

James also goes on in this summary to say, “Your favoritism doesn't even make logical sense.”

Look at verse 6. But you've dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?

In other words, what are you thinking? You're fawning on Sunday over the very person who may drag you into debtors' prison on Monday.

In the first century there was the legal custom called “summary arrest.” If a creditor met a debtor on the street, he could seize him by his robe and literally drag him to court. Often times the wealthy used their influence in property disputes and the poor were without representation.

Again, James is not condemning the rich for being rich or powerful, but for using their wealth and power to gain an advantage over the poor.

We saw that recently as officials in Beijing ordered the bulldozing and dismantling of hundreds of homes of poor people to make room for Olympic buildings.

d. Favoritism creates friendships with blasphemers

Quickly, James goes on to add one more reason partiality toward unbelievers who are wealthy and

powerful is because, *verse 7* tells us, ***Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?***”

Again, speaking in general terms, the wealthy and powerful and well connected of the world are unbelieving and antagonistic. When the church cow-tows to them they are effectively forging friendships with blasphemers.

James writes, ***“Those who blaspheme the fair name of our Lord, by which you have been called.”***

That phrase, translated ***“by which you have been called”***, is the same Greek word used for a wife taking her husband’s name in marriage.^{xviii}

We are the bride of Christ—will we pander after and fuss over someone who blasphemes the name of our bridegroom? Will we give the chief seat of honor to someone who dishonors our Lord’s name and reputation? James would say, “How wrong is that?”

If you recall *verse 1*, this is why favoritism and partiality are especially sinful and at the same time, really tragic.

Go back to *verse 1*—***My brethren, don’t hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.***

In other words, we have come in here and we as an assembly are in the presence of ***our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.***

You could translate it, ***the Lord Jesus Christ who is the glory***—which is a reference to the shekinah glory—the brightness of the glory of God.

Isaiah prophesied that ***the glory of the Lord will be revealed (Isaiah 40:5)***; Paul wrote to Titus, ***“we have the hope of the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus. (Titus 2:13).***

The Greek word for glory is ‘*doxa*’—which gives us our word ‘doxology’. Christ is the *doxa*—the glory of God.

We praise the glory of our God, displayed through Jesus Christ.

We come as an assembly into the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ ***who is glorious!***

Here’s the point—in His presence we all look shabby . . . we all look dirty compared to His holiness . . . we all look hopeless and homeless . . .

How can the church or the Christian ever play the role of a snob? Compared to Him, we look like clay pots.

But this is the glory of Christ and His gospel:

- Though we look shabby we are now saints;
- Though we are dirty daily, we have been made clean through Christ’s atonement;
- Though hopeless, we have now been granted a future and a hope;
- Though homeless, we are now given royal status equally together—equally together—as sons and daughters of whose eternal home is His kingdom;
- Though clay pots—He has chosen to pour into us the treasure of His gospel . . . to pour out on others.

We are not to be snobs; we should be spicketts of grace.

I’ll never forget a mechanic that was working on my truck years ago in his back yard—a guy I had met—I was working on him with the gospel while he worked on my pick up—he stopped and looked at me and said, “Listen, I work out here on weekends to meet the bills . . . to make ends meet . . . sometimes late on Saturday night I’m out here and sometimes on Sunday morning . . . do you think it’d be okay if I came to your church with grease on my hands?” And the answer, church, is what? Yes!

Come join this collection of clay pots. Come join this assembly of nobodies. Jim Elliott the missionary wrote, we are all nobodies attempting to exalt Somebody.

That Somebody happens to be our Lord Jesus Christ who is glorious!

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- ii John MacArthur, James (Moody Press, 1998), p. 98
- iii D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH, 1992), p. 132
- iv Hesiod, Theogony Works and Days, Shield (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 76
- v Hiebert, p. 132
- vi MacArthur, p. 102
- vii Hiebert, p. 136
- viii Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2008), p. 107
- ix Hiebert, p. 136
- x Blomberg & Kamell, p. 108
- xi Spiros Zodhiates, The Work of Faith (AMG Publishers, 1985), p. 155
- xii Zodhiates, p. 156
- xiii R. Kent Hughes, James: Faith that Works (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 88
- xiv Hiebert, p. 137
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- xvi Hughes, p. 89
- xvii Adapted from Tony Evans, The Perfect Christian (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 73
- xviii Barclay, p. 67