

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: the history of God's people

Give thanks to God for the stories of Genesis, and in particular the life of Abraham from which we can learn so much about faith and obedience. Dip anywhere into Genesis 12-23 to remind yourself of some of the important facts of these ancient stories.

For myself

All praise to You, Lord God,
for the power of love and compassion
for the joy of family and happiness of friendship,
for the wonder of creativity and delight of achievement,
for the miracle of our faith and the wonder of glory,
and for all we have in You, our Lord and God;
we praise You and adore You
AMEN

For others

Pray for the people of Israel and for those living in Gaza. Pray that God will bring peace to this land and bless those who live there, and pray that the forces of evil that drive violence will be defeated, in every way possible.

Meditation

Memory; a precious gift, which given to God
can work for spiritual strength and succour

Give it time and space, to bring true peace
to all the past which stands in need of healing

Give it time and space, to penetrate the truth
illuminating all the sins for which Christ died

Give it time and space, to tell again the story
of how self can change in faith and hope and love.

Give it time and space, to bring to mind the facts
by which salvation is revealed within the Word

Give it time and space, to serve in faithfulness
throughout life's journey to its greater glory

Memory; a precious gift; now yield it to Your God.
So it may work within your soul for good and not for ill

Bible Passage

James 2:1-7

¹ My friends, you do not keep faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ by showing favouritism. ² For if someone comes into your church dressed up in gold and fine clothing followed by a poor person in shabby clothes, ³ but you give attention to the one who is well dressed by saying, 'Do, please, have a seat over here,' and deal with the poor by saying, 'Stand there' or, 'Sit on the floor', ⁴ have you not discriminated amongst yourselves and become judges with evil designs?

⁵ Listen, my dear friends. Has not God chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom He has promised to those who love Him? ⁶ But you have insulted the poor! Is it not the rich who exploit you, and force their judgements on you? ⁷ Is it not they who blaspheme the good name by which you are known?

Review

As we move into the next chapter of James' letter, there is a slight change of emphasis. The subject of today's passage for study is a wonderfully graphic passage that describes some very poor attitudes in the church to which he wrote! At the heart of all this lies attitudes held by Christian people towards the rich and towards the poor. James must have been writing to people he believed to be in need of hearing some home truths about putting faith into practice! He bluntly exposes the evil of prejudice within the life of the church, and justifies his denunciation with vigorous Gospel arguments. At the very least, the manner in which James writes here is a reminder to us that in the midst of the many pressing demands upon our churches just now, God's priorities remain for the poor, and this must surely be reflected in our Gospel agenda today.

As in chapter one of James' letter, there are many similarities between what we find here and the teaching of Jesus. For example, we are reminded of what Jesus famously said when He began to teach (in the Sermon on the Mount) about those who would inherit the Kingdom; '*blessed are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven*' (Matthew 5:32). Jesus frequently spoke of the needs of the poor (e.g. Luke 14:8f., 12:33 etc.), and valued the gifts of the poor, notably, the meagre offering placed by a poor widow the Temple treasury (Luke 21:1-4). He also offered the disciples the parable/story of '*Dives and Lazarus*' (Luke 16:20f.), in which Lazarus, the poor man, entered the Kingdom as the rich man Dives agonised in hell, cut off by his decision to please himself and ignore the poor. Jesus' teaching was clear; the poor were free from earth's bondage and were loved by God, and as such they were more likely to respond to His call. Remember, Jesus famously said '*it is easier for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle!*' (Matt 19:24).

In this passage of Scripture, James applied Jesus teaching about God's love of the poor directly to the world of church life. He also attacked those who lived by the intrigues of power and influence within the church, exposing these as utterly contrary to the Gospel. This brief passage is probably one that should be read repeatedly by many of God's people today; it has certainly been ignored in large chunks of history, and sometimes, the church has arguably failed as a consequence. Thank God we do not now live in an age where people pay 'rent' for their seats in church, paying more for the 'better' seats; a practice that has died out only within the lifetime of some. Certainly, one lady described just this to me when I went to preach at her church in the 1980's! How can people do such things in the light of what James' letter says here?

Frankly, we cringe to read James' description here of someone greeting people at church and showing the rich to the good seats and signalling to the poor to stand or sit on the floor! His words in verse 4 summarise his feelings; *'have you not discriminated amongst yourselves and become judges with evil designs?'* (2:4). Such erroneous judgement is a worldly phenomenon, and the sheer injustice of it on a humanitarian level is mind-boggling. The rich are pandered to because people think that they will give the money necessary for its upkeep! God however, sees the potential and equality of each human being, and there is no room for favouritism. But note that here, the problem is not with the rich people themselves, but the attitude towards them of others. The rich are not responsible for all the sins of the church!

It is easy for us to agree with what James says, but the truth of the matter is that most of us fall prey to all manner of favouritism and prejudice simply because of our preferences about those with whom we wish to spend our time. This may not be intentional discrimination, but unfortunately, we can allow this to become blindness when we are so busy with our normal friends that we fail to see the needs of others around us, particularly the poor. James presents this message graphically (2:2-4) and challenges His people to ensure their lives are governed not by natural desires, but by spiritual needs and the guidance of the Holy Spirit within. The Gospel requires us to sacrifice our own likes and dislikes in favour of the values of the Kingdom of God, and this means that our eyes and ears need to be open to the needs of others as well as our hearts. Often, in our desire to pursue what is on our own minds, and often quite unthinkingly, we do not see the needy in our midst. However, Christ calls us to honour the poor more highly than anyone else, and like Him, we are to make it our business to defer to the poor, not to the rich.

Why is it therefore, that many churches are still run by the people who have worldly influence and status, such as those who hold the purse strings, speak well, have 'influence', or who pay for the 'minister'? By comparison, what authority and advantage do the poor have in our midst? This is a serious question, which needs a serious answer. James was not conducting a witch-hunt against any individuals in his letter, not even rich people; he sought only to apply Jesus' teaching to the real life setting of the church of his day. Both Jesus and James agree that the poor (and to this Jesus adds children) will sometimes have a clearer insight into the things of the Kingdom than those who possess worldly wealth. They also say that those who have much will have the greatest difficulty in living a life worthy of the Gospel (Matt 19:24) and in demonstrating the values of the Kingdom of God.

Almost invariably, those who have had little worldly wealth, power or influence have led the spiritual growth and renewal of the Church for the last two thousand years. Wesley, Luther, and the founders of Pentecostalism were most certainly not rich people. Whatever renown they have achieved has come because of the work they have done for the Gospel, and not because of their wealth, though many have been well supported by people of considerable means. This should tell us a great deal about where to start looking for our spiritual leaders of the future!

Discipleship

Application

The rich

I have met some who go to church who are relatively rich, and who cringe at being 'favoured' in church because they have means. The implication is always that they will 'pay' if necessary, which accounts for the fawning behaviour shown to them, which they abhor. There are indeed rich people in church who have been saved through the blood of Jesus, and who are deeply conscious of their privileges and duties as God's people.

As we have seen, James' message here is not 'anti-rich', it is 'anti-favouritism of the rich'. As such, this is a challenge to each one of us concerning our attitudes towards people. Our eyes must be for all who are in need because God is a God of giving and God of love, and His eyes are directed towards those who want and need His love.

The poor

While I feel sorry for those who are wealthy and who have made a great impact on God's work by means of their generosity, their plight before this Scripture is not great. However, I have seen too much poverty, and know that unless the church works harder at its practical witness amongst the poorest of people, then we fail to preach the true Gospel. This passage is one of the foremost passages of Scripture to prick our consciences about the priority of the poor in the Gospel of Christ. Every church should long to have the poor of its neighbourhood within its ranks and if it does not, then it has arguably failed in its witness.

Ideas for what to do

- Discuss with friends at your church whether anything similar to what James describes has happened in your church. What can be done about this?
- Make a note of the 'poor' people you know. If the list is short, prayerfully consider what can be done about this. Over a period of time, try to introduce yourself to more people at church (if this is possible), and so get to know all the people better.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How would you feel about this scripture if you were wealthy, and how do you feel about this scripture if you are wealthy?
2. Who are the poor in our midst, and who are the wealthy in our midst, and how may they be appropriately helped?
3. What lessons can we learn from this passage of scripture about how we govern the church?

Final Prayer

Help us learn from this day, Lord God. In your wisdom, teach us how to make the best of every situation in which we find ourselves, and in Your mercy, protect us from all the works of the evil one. All praise to You, our Lord and God, our friend and Saviour: AMEN

