

Impartial Love – James Again
November 29, 2020
James 2:1-13

The last Bible Study lesson of this quarter features a scripture reading from the book of James. Recall that we spent 5 weeks on James last quarter. It seems that the book of James, with just five short chapters, is the very favorite scripture source for the authors of our Bible Study literature, certainly if measured by the number of lessons per word. However, this particular reading didn't happen to be among the five chosen last quarter. It is a frequently visited passage, speaking to issues of equity. So it's no surprise to find it as the "final word" the author has for us this quarter.

As we approach this passage, James 2:1-13, let us just remind ourselves who James is, assuming this letter is from, or at least projects the viewpoints, of James the Just. James was Jesus's brother, likely the oldest of the other brothers since he is listed first. He was not a follower during Jesus's earthly ministry (see Mark 6:3-4), but became the leader of the Jerusalem church later. After the resurrection, Paul says that Jesus appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7), and the brothers of Jesus are listed among those gathered in prayer, along with the apostles (Acts 1:14).

The epistle itself simply identifies its author as "James," equivalent to Hebrew Jacob. He is a church leader, "servant" (1:1), and is "one of those who teach" (3:1). There are no personal details at all. The style and literary qualities of the book suggest that the author was a fluent in Greek and familiar with Greek philosophy and literary methods, such as form of writing for instruction in second person, and the diatribe form that James uses frequently. Yet the content is clearly very Jewish in character rather than Hellenistic. Very little of what James says wouldn't be equally applicable within Hebraic Judaism. Church tradition says that the writer is James, Jesus's brother, rather than the son of Zebedee (who was martyred very early c. 43 A.D.) or the more obscure "James the less," another apostle. Scholars tend to assign authorship to someone other than James the Lord's brother, but writing from the point of view of that James. A Jew from Nazareth would not be so accomplished in Greek. Jesus's brother would be expected to say so, and say more about Jesus's words, or include some sort of specific details.

By the time Acts was written, and by the time Paul was writing his letters, as in I Corinthians 9:5 and Galatians 2:9, James, the Lord's brother, was an important leader in the Church. Even the preeminent leader, as seen in Acts 15:13-21.

It is noteworthy that Paul's letter to the Galatians mentions that one of the things asked of Paul and Barnabas at the Council of Jerusalem was to "remember the poor." This is consistent with James's concern in today's scripture passage, as well as being an emphasis in Luke's gospel and in Acts.

As mentioned last week, the early Jerusalem church seemed to be sustained by the sale of assets by its members. As long as new members were numerous, that model worked. But when the Church began to be persecuted, by Saul, as well as other Jewish authorities, getting new members would have become more difficult. The members may well have eventually run short of assets to sell.

The Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts and Galatians, seems to have occurred about 50 A.D., two decades or so after the early church of Acts 2-5. The decision in favor of allowing Gentile believers not to have to become Jews, specifically to be circumcised, is usually the most important emphasis in describing the council. Yet Paul's mention of the need "to remember the poor" seems to have been the focus of a fundraising drive by him and the churches he had started over the next couple of years. His return to Jerusalem in Acts Chapter 21, explicitly to visit James, was also to deliver the gifts from the gentile churches to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 21:17). Acts does not say anything about this offering that I found, but Paul mentions it in his letters, for example, extensively in 2 Corinthians. It's reasonable to suppose that the "poor" James asked Paul to remember were the fellowship of the church in Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem church seems to have had to walk a fine line between the gospel and staying sufficiently Jewish so that they were allowed in the Temple and Jerusalem as Jews. James the Just was said to be particularly noted for his piety and righteousness. Even so, when a particularly vicious Sadducee named Ananus (also translated as Ananias) became High Priest, he had James the brother of Jesus stoned in about 62 A.D. (Josephus tells of this, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1). A different historian, Hegesippus, puts James's martyrdom just before the siege of Jerusalem, about 66 A.D. Eventually Judaism completely rejected Christianity, but the Jerusalem church had disappeared by A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem.

So, we can approach this letter from James as an epistle written from the perspective of James in Jerusalem to the wider church as a teaching letter of instruction. As described in last quarter's lessons, James can be considered "wisdom literature", a collection of sayings and lessons that are intended to give guidance to individuals and churches, maybe about 80 to 100 A.D.

After the warning against partiality, the specific scenario that opens our passage is, **“For if a man with gold rings and fine clothing comes into your assembly ...”** I’m using here RSV; NRSV uses the word “person” instead of “man,” but I think that loses the flavor of what is intended. Someone wealthy and powerful is pictured. Notably, someone whose gifts, should he look favorably on the church, might be very, very helpful in sustaining the church! For the church in Jerusalem, that was a particular issue! And, that issue is not insignificant in our day, either. At the same time, someone poor and in dirty clothes would be seen by the Jerusalem church, perhaps, as another mouth to feed out of a dwindling pool of communal assets. My point here is that the issue is not just blind prejudice. For a poor community, it may have been seen as an issue of resource allocation.

Even so, James is absolutely right in his condemnation of partiality in such a case. In a sense, the partiality, if based on a view of resource income versus outgo, betrays a lack of faith. Will God provide what is needed? Can pandering to the wealthy, in actions, honors, doctrines or privileges, be beneficial to the church? Or the discouragement of, or turning away of, the poor? James says no. Indeed, the hypocrisy in doing so is a betrayal of Jesus’s words.

It is interesting that, as Paul speaks of his collection of the gifts to the Jerusalem Church, that he writes, to the Corinthians, concerning the church in Macedonia, **“...for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints ...”** (2 Corinthians 9: 2-4) This kind of behavior is more characteristic of the poor church members of great faith, rather than the wealthy. As James says of the rich, **“Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?”** (James 2:6). It is the wealthy who know how to use the tools of power. It is they who control how wealth flows.

It is the wealthy who are more likely to ask, “What can membership in this church do for me?” instead of “What service can I be to Jesus and others through this church?” Now, that attitude is not unique to the wealthy. In Paul’s day, and in our day, there are people who attach themselves to a church as a source of financial help. The poor are not necessarily righteous, just as the wealthy are not necessarily unrighteous. Paul condemned those who would eat but not work (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12). We need to be careful of stereotypes.

In fact, even in the ancient church, Christians as a group were not necessarily poor. There are examples that suggest this in the New testament writings. We know, for example, that Paul's first church member in Philippi was Lydia, a seller of purple. As such, she was probably fairly wealthy. The early churches often met in members' homes, something that would be possible only for relatively wealthy persons. The picture of the early church in Corinth from 1 Corinthians paints a picture of members diverse in wealth as well as in background, religion, and status. Some church members (in Corinth and elsewhere) were wealthy enough to own slaves, such as Philemon. Others were so poor as to be slaves, such as Onesimus. Christianity tended to take root in the cities rather than in the countryside, where people were on the whole poorer. Even among Jesus's followers, there seemed to be people of means, including the family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, for example. John and James left their father Zebedee to follow Jesus, but he had hired men who would be able to keep the family business going (Mark 1:19-20).

Yet, the writer of James in verses 5-6 seems to assume the Christians are pretty much exclusively poor. This may well be indicative of a Jerusalem Church perspective for this epistle. We know that, in fact, during the time of Paul's ministry the Jerusalem church was desperately poor. This was so much so, that James made his appeal to remember the poor and Paul was eager to take a collection to benefit them. It may even be that James and the Jerusalem church were willing to bend their earlier insistence on circumcision of all believers, based on this love and generosity as reported by Paul and Barnabus at the Council in Jerusalem, and later demonstrated by Paul's visit with the offering.

A few interesting wrinkles: The word translated as "assembly" in verse 2 is actually the Greek word for "synagogue." The term "show partiality" is literally "receive persons." The partiality described is particularly out of place in a worship setting, when all present should be setting aside their pride in their relationship to God. "Take notice" (NRSV) or "Pay attention" (RSV) in verse 3 is literally "to look (favorably) upon." The *Interpreter's Bible* gives this description: "The speaker in vs. 3 does not appear to be an official appointed to attend to visitors, but is a member of the congregation sitting in a comfortable seat provided with a footstool. He rises and offers the wealthy stranger this seat but contemptuously gives the poor man only the choice between standing or sitting on the floor." (*Interpreter's Bible*, v. 12, 1957, p.36) This picture fits better in a home than in a dedicated structure for worship, like a synagogue building, which would likely not be the case at this point in the church's history.

James returns to the general principle in verse 8, quoting “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (From Lev 19:18). In the language of the time, a “royal” law has authority, in contrast to other laws that may not be authoritative. Obedience to this precept is mandatory. The fact that one might be obedient to other parts of the law does not provide an excuse for transgression on this matter. Still, James does recognize that we all depend on God’s mercy, and hence our own obligation to be merciful to others. Jesus’s parable of the wicked servant comes to mind.

It may seem that James has such a Jewish perspective that there is little specifically Christian here. To some extent that is true, but notice that James emphasizes the moral law, not the ceremonial law of Judaism. He puts an emphasis on mercy over judgment. He speaks of the poor as those favored by God. That’s Jesus speaking, not the Judaism of James’s day, which often saw illness or poverty as signs of sin, and health and wealth as indicative of righteousness.

Again, I think the author of our lessons may go a bit overboard in using James as a bludgeon to chastise us for behavior in our day. Is it really wrong to save a seat for a friend at the table for a church dinner? Wouldn’t it be good if seating at church dinners was at such a premium! Is that unwarranted “partiality?” I think not. I think, too often, the church tries to lay guilt trips on people who are doing their best, and are nevertheless less than perfect. We all know we sometimes don’t measure up. Sometimes we really do need to exercise common sense, or instincts. Things that might even be considered prejudices, in that we act without analysis in the moment. We should not live in fear of offending or transgression, but instead be open, welcoming, and loving. We ultimately depend of God’s grace.

Prayer: Lord God, we are grateful for your mercy and care. Enable us to find ways to eliminate prejudice and correct its negative effects. Amen.

A final note: We didn’t have anybody for the Bible Study this past Sunday. Church attendance also seemed down. I can understand reluctance to take the risks with the virus case numbers still rising. This coming Sunday Cindy and I will be there (we’re obligated – we are doing the Advent reading). I’ve asked Pam and Vivien to mail the Bible Study booklets to those of you who don’t have them yet. You should have them in time for the Sunday after next. Meanwhile, I hope all of you continue in health. We all are in God’s hands, and we know He cares for us.