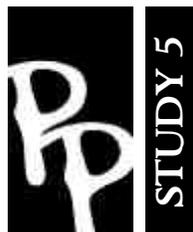


## FAVOURITISM IS SINFUL



### James 2:1-7

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Over to you

### Introduction to the passage

James now turns his attention to the sin of favouritism in which more respect is shown to rich people or those in high position than to poor people who have no power or authority. In our note on 1:21 we suggested that new Christians are prone to carry old habits into their new life. Such things often take a long time to correct. It may be that one of these habits was to honour the rich and despise the poor, and that this needed correction. In 1:27 James says that we must look after those who are poor and needy. We are certainly not doing this if we treat them without respect; rather, this means we are “polluted by the world” (1:27). So James is very stern in his attack in these verses on sinful favouritism.

### What these verses mean

Verse 1

**My brothers,**

The use of this phrase usually indicates the introduction of a new subject or a new slant on a subject being discussed. It also shows the warmth of James to those to whom he is writing. It emphasises the relationship he has with them.

**as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ,**

James could have easily written, “My brothers, don’t show favouritism.” Yet James inserts this little phrase asserting their profession of faith. The way the phrase was originally written in Greek has caused some interesting discussion points amongst translators. The point to note about this phrase is the emphasis on what is to follow. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who shows all the glory of his Father and heaven, did not distance himself from men. He willingly came down from heaven, in all his perfection, to this earth. He mixed willingly with all types and classes of people. The religious leaders criticised Jesus for doing this (Matt. 9:11). Now James is going to make the point that if the Son of God did not discriminate between different classes of people, nor should his followers.

**don’t show favouritism.**

Any kind of bias in favour of people because of their wealth, position or fame is sinful because every human person is of equal worth in God’s sight. The people of Israel had to learn this (Deut.1:17), and the apostle Peter had to learn it (Acts 10:34), but because of our sinful hearts, the lesson has to be frequently repeated. Here James insists that faith in Jesus Christ and favouritism are contradictory. Jesus Christ is a glorious Lord, and his glory was displayed in a state of humility, poverty and rejection (John 1:14). If his followers are not to be hypocrites, they will never show more respect to one class of people above another. This is at least part of what Paul meant in 2 Corinthians 5:16 – favouritism is “worldly” and must be shunned.

Verse 2

**Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in.**

Having stated a basic rule in verse 1, James, as a good teacher, now gives an example that his readers would easily understand. He sets before his readers a practical illustration that could happen in any local church setting. Two strangers arrive. One is clearly wealthy because of the clothes and jewellery he is wearing. The other is poor. They present a total contrast, one in rings the other in rags.

Verse 3

**If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,”**

Notice the way they were treated. The rich man was offered a good seat whilst the poor man was not shown any interest and was told he could stand in a particular place or sit on the floor.<sup>1</sup> Whilst James has invented this

<sup>1</sup> See page 3 for footnote

scene he knows that he is describing reality. James is exposing a sin that is found in all societies of the world. We make assessments upon a person's financial resources and not their moral qualities. If we perceive that they are wealthy we pander to them. If they seem to have no possessions we ignore and disregard them. Does this not happen in our local congregations today? We may not be so obvious in our actions, but our thoughts follow James' illustration.

Verse 4

***have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?***

To discriminate is to think more highly of one thing or kind of person than another. When we do this, we expose whether our thinking is guided by Scripture or by worldly standards. The Bible teaches that all people are made by God and in his image (Gen.1:27), which means that we all have some reflection of our maker. Therefore no one is to be despised because of poverty, ignorance, colour or anything else. It is true that parents are to be obeyed, and rulers are to be honoured, but that is only because of their responsibilities. In the same verse that Peter says, "Honour the king," he also says, "Show proper respect to everyone" (1 Pet. 2:17). When we judge other people on the basis of outward appearances, we are guilty of "moral filth" (1:21), from which we must be cleansed (John 7:24).

Verse 5

***Listen, my dear brothers:***

James expresses himself more affectionately than he did in 2:1. He has just drawn attention to their sin. He is not pleased with their behaviour, but in his rebuke he shows his deep and personal affection for them. The pastoral heart will rebuke and correct the sinner yet love the person who has committed the sin. The phrase also draws the attention of James' readers to a theological statement that he is about to make. It is in the form of a question and will state two important truths. Firstly, God's sovereign right and secondly, the present and future riches for the believer.

<sup>1</sup> Local Christian congregations differ in the way they gather for worship. In some cultures there is a mixture of people sitting on chairs and benches whilst others sit on the floor on mats. James is not referring to such arrangements at all. How a congregation organises its gathering is its own decision. The point that has to be remembered is that there is consistency in the way things are done. For example, if it is the practice that all girls and single young women sit on floor mats then it would be wrong for one such person to be suddenly asked to take a seat elsewhere because she might be wearing nice, expensive clothes.

***Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world***

It is our common experience that of the two visitors to the church, the one in shabby clothes is more likely to be a believer than the other. In our Lord's teaching the poor would more readily receive the gospel than the rich (Matt. 19:16-26; Luke 6:20). This is largely because, naturally, the rich do not realise a sense of need so often as do the poor. This principle is clearly seen in the state of the church throughout the world. The church is more vibrant and populous in societies of weaker economies than in developed, rich societies. But it is important to compare Scripture with Scripture, and to see that some rich people are also "rich toward God", such as Abraham (Gen. 13:6) and Job (1:1-3; 42:12-16). In 1 Corinthians 1:26 Paul does not say that "not any" great people were saved, but he says "not many". Although there are natural explanations why it is largely the poor who are saved, James tells us here that the basic reason is that God chose them to be "rich in faith". The idea is not that God chose them because they loved him, but in order that he would cause them to love him. (See the Focus Point 2 in Study Paper 3 about Election.)

***to be rich in faith***

People are not chosen because they are rich in faith but they are chosen to be rich in faith. Faith is given as a gift and is a result of God's grace. Grace is not a reward, but undeserved favour that a higher being shows to a lower creature. The God-given faith enables the recipient (Christian) to see more and more the truth of Christ. In our knowledge and speaking of him we become enriched (1 Co. 1:5). A person who has a small grain of faith, sufficient to see that Christ has died in his place and therefore trusts him as Saviour, is already richer than the wealthiest sinner in the world.<sup>2</sup>

***and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?***

Believers are chosen to inherit the kingdom of God. This is certain. The kingdom that believers inherit is the sphere in which Christ rules. This is invisible to the world now (John 18:36), but when Christ returns, this kingdom will be visible in the new heaven and earth (2 Pet.3:13). God will be there and a continuing relationship will exist between the believer and God at a level that the Christian never knew before. There will be no need for faith because we will see God. There will be no need for hope for what we longed for will have been realised. But there will be love (1 Co. 13:8-10). Heaven for the Christian will be the deepest relationship he has ever known.<sup>3</sup>

Verse 6

***But you have insulted the poor.***

It seems that James was aware of specific cases of the kind of discrimination he is condemning as an insult. In the light of the example he used of the two

<sup>2</sup> John Blanchard, *Truth for Life* (Evangelical Press)

men (2:2-3) and the teaching of 2:5, James is saying that the way they have treated the poor is a direct contradiction of the will of God. They had decided that the poor man was not worthy to sit on a seat with them in church, yet God had chosen them to be with him in the heavenly realms.

***Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?***

The insult is made more painful if it involves favouring the very kind of people who are persecuting the churches. Every generation of Christians has experienced oppression of some sort by the wealthy, who tend to be in positions of authority. The apostle Paul was guilty of this before he was converted (Acts 8:3; 1 Tim.1:13), and it was the constant experience of the early church (Acts 4:1-3, 13:50, 16:19, 19:23-41). Why would the rich and influential behave this way? Because they were unconverted. The gospel would have challenged their consciences over their wealth and pride. Those in religious high positions would have been alerted to the emptiness of their rituals and ceremonies.

Verse 7

***Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?***

This is the climax of their crime. They not only drag God's people into court but bring the Lord's name into contempt. This makes showing favouritism to rich people even more unthinkable. The name of Jesus is always precious to believers and they are hurt when the ungodly speak ill of Christ. Christians take Christ's name to themselves when they are baptised as believers (Gal.3:27). By behaving the way they did, the Christians to whom James was writing would have been bringing the name of Christ and their own witness to him into disrepute. They were being inconsistent. That same danger exists for Christians today.



## Summary

These verses teach us the great importance of the quality of our church life. Christ is the Head of the church, and our conduct in every part of our local church must be under his control and guided by the Scriptures. The result will be a community that has completely different standards from any other club or society. One aspect of that difference will be our attitude to other people. This is part of what Paul means in 2 Corinthians 5:16; we will see every person, no matter what their outward appearance, as someone made by God and who needs Jesus Christ for salvation.



## A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

**Theme:** Discrimination is an evil to be renounced

By discrimination is meant any tendency to treat some people with favouritism and not others, on the basis of physical appearance, education, class, colour or nationality. We must declare that all people are equal before God, and honour that declaration in practice.

### I In all our dealings with other people

This must be so because we are all created by God and in his image.

1. We are all made by God

This is contrary to the idea of evolution that teaches the survival of the fittest. This teaching leads to the idea that some people are superior to others.

2. We are all made in the image of God (Gen.1:27)

- a. Distinct from animals, we can reason and create, and we know right from wrong.
- b. To discriminate is to insult our maker whose image we all bear.

### II In church life

Christians, who should know better, are too often guilty of discrimination in church life.

1. We do this when –

- a. We are more friendly to people we like than to others.
- b. We more readily welcome rich, respectable, educated people, than others.
- c. We appoint such people to positions of leadership, even though they are not so spiritually minded as others.

2. When we do this we forget –

- a. That we are all sinful and in need of salvation.
- b. That none of us are saved because of any virtue in us.
- c. That we are all totally dependent on Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for sinners.



## Over to you

Are there people in your church and congregation who are given less attention because they are less attractive?

When you have to address a person who has sinned, in what spirit do you do it?

How do you give responsible tasks to those in your congregation? Is it because you like them, they are influential, you get on with them? What do you think your criterion should be?