

8 September 2024

Thoughts on Class Warfare

James 2:1-9

We continue our month in the Book of James, reading from James chapter 2, verses 1-9:

2 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', 4have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 9But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

To understand this reading, I feel as if we need some historical background on Roman society. That society was *rigorously* stratified: there were clear classes in society, arranged in order of privilege, and those levels were hard and fast. At the top of society was the emperor, of course, who had *all* the privilege. Just below him, though, was the senatorial class, made up of wealthy noble Roman families. Below the senators were other wealthy landowners, and below them were soldiers, tradespeople, peasant farmers, and finally slaves. Slaves had *no* privileges, and constituted between half and two-thirds of the population. Each level depended on the level above it for “patronage” and in return for those favors gave *gratis*. That’s the Latin word from which we get “gratitude” but in Roman society it didn’t mean “saying thank you.” It meant paying their patron in tribute money or labor or military service. There was very little social mobility. A peasant might join the army and move up somewhat in the world, and a great general who had acquired wealth could join the elites, but for most people the level you were born in was the level you would die in.

Indeed, this inequality was almost an article of faith for the Romans. The hierarchical nature of society was thought to be a reflection of the divine order. Thus, if someone got uppity and started encroaching on a higher class, it wasn’t just rude. It was almost blasphemous. Let me illustrate the Roman mindset this way: when we hear the word “justice” we think of everyone being treated the same way, right? But in Rome, “justice” meant everyone being treated *according to their level in society*. “Justice” wasn’t equality; it was everyone staying in their divinely mandated inequality.

Now the Romans weren’t the only ones who saw society as a divinely ordained hierarchy; all the ancient empires did to some degree. Before the Romans, it was the Greeks, and before them, the Persians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians. But there was one significant society in the ancient world that saw the world differently. That was the Jews, and for their time they were genuinely weird. Their holy book begins with the assertion that their God made all

humanity *in God's own image*. That is, everyone from the highest king to the lowest slave bore the same image of the divine. It's hard to overstate how shocking this idea must have been to a world that might say that kings and emperors were divine, but slaves? As we look ahead in the Hebrew scriptures we see that God chose a people to be particular servants – but it was a people from the lowest rungs of society. It started with a nomadic Hebrew shepherd named Abraham and his clan. Those Hebrews then became slaves in Egypt, but God set them free. And when those freed slaves conquered a homeland, their God chose leaders for them from the least likely places. God chose women, peasants, younger sons, outlaws, and exiles. When the Hebrews eventually asked God for a king, God settled on ... a youngest son shepherd named David. Exactly the type you would not want your daughter to marry. (Worse, he was a musician.)

And all this weird equality was preserved in the laws of the Hebrews. Incredibly, the Jewish law applied to everyone, even to the king. Everyone was to be given the same rights under the laws, including foreigners. There are explicit instructions in the Jewish law that judges are to treat everyone equally with no preference given either to the rich or to the poor. Now we take rules like this for granted, but before the Hebrews no one had ever heard of such a thing. Most of all, the reason the Hebrews were to show no favoritism was because their God did not. Over and over the law tells us “God has no favorites” – literally, “God does not recognize faces.”

Now, it's fair to say that Israel didn't always live up to these ideals, any more than we do today. We human beings seem to have a default setting for creating hierarchies wherever we go. We apparently like to have someone above us to envy and hate and someone below us to despise and hate. Class warfare is in our DNA. So Israel did establish hierarchies, but God rejected them and kept sending prophets to remind them that the poor are to be given the same respect as everyone else, and that even kings and emperors will face judgment.

So now, having used up maybe half of my sermon time, let's look back at our reading from James. Now we know the context: James is writing to Jewish Christians who are scattered throughout the Roman Empire. In other words, to people who were raised with the Jewish notion that all are equal under God, because all were created in God's image, but who also live in the rigidly classified Roman society, where such an idea was just short of blasphemy. Moreover, the churches James's readers were part of consisted of people from both worlds – some Jews and some Gentiles. How would those very different views of society co-exist in the new church?

They didn't. They couldn't; they were opposite. And thanks be to God, in the Early Church the Jewish worldview won. One of things that most astonished Roman observers about the Christian church was that when Christians held gatherings, they would meet all together: men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Greeks, Roman citizens and foreigners, rich and poor. There was no hierarchy; it was unfathomable. When the Jewish church and Gentile culture collided, the church compromised on a lot of things: they didn't require circumcision or kosher diets, for instance. But the church stubbornly held on to the Jews' principle of equality under God. All people were created in God's image, and Christ gave himself for all people. Our passage today is James reminding his readers not let this essential teaching slip. Make sure you aren't treating different people differently in your church. James says, “Remember what it says in the Law: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. That means that if you show favoritism to anyone, you have sinned. You have crossed the line and broken God's law.”

So how are we doing?

Now, we should note that the cases aren't exactly the same. As I said, Roman society was founded on the principle that inequality was right and just, but our modern society disagrees. *All men are created equal*, our Declaration of Independence says, and we believe in *human* rights – that is, rights that all people have just because they are human. (Huh, wonder where we got that notion.) We don't live up to these ideals, but even when we fall short of them, they are still our ideals. We don't have an official class system – an aristocracy. But remember what I said earlier: we humans have a universal tendency to set up hierarchies. Ask any middle-schooler. So where are the unequal social levels of our society? How do we sort ourselves into different classes? Well, there's wealth, of course, and property. Most of our "status symbols" simply represent wealth: big houses, expensive cars, designer clothing, and so forth. We all read the article when Forbes' annual list of the 100 richest Americans comes out. But there are other hierarchies, too. America has a fascination with fame as a sort of upper class. You'll sometimes hear people talk about "Hollywood Royalty," an aristocracy based on being famous. We could go on, but this should suffice to show that our society has social classes every bit as much as Roman society did in the days of the early church, so we too need to hear James's blunt reminder. Whatever society as a whole is like, whatever form class conflict takes in our world, the people of God are supposed to be different. In this gathering, all are equal in our need for God's grace, and all are equal in the joy of having received it. This is not an optional thing. Showing favoritism is a sin. James says bluntly, "If you show favoritism in your gathering, do you even know Christ?"

So, again: How are we doing?

I'm honestly not sure. The American church as a whole has become primarily a middle and upper-class phenomenon, and this is particularly true of mainline churches like us. And that's a sin. But what about us here? Well, if you look around our congregation on any given Sunday, you're likely to see a lot of people who look like they're from the same demographic and income level. We have an inclusion statement at Lake Street that says we regard all people of sacred worth *regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, national origin, culture, tradition, physical or mental ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other difference*. But I wonder whether we do a better job of welcoming every gender and sexuality than every income level. To use James's own example: what would happen if someone in ragged clothes who perhaps hadn't washed in a while walked into our service? Would we rush over to welcome that person with the same eagerness that we would use to welcome a well-dressed visiting couple who arrived in a new SUV? I kind of think we would, but again, I'm honestly not sure.

Last week, when we started James, I talked about how he was not interested in theological disputes but rather in how we live our faith in relationship. Well, we can all cheer that in theory, but living our faith in the God who created all people and redeemed all people means living in relationship with all people, and we're not wired for that. It's hard. James doesn't care that it's hard. Do it anyway.

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I have a new favorite comedian that I watch on YouTube – Josh Johnson. In one set, about millionaire pastors, he ends with a story about a comedy show he went to in New York where a homeless woman was wandering around asking for money and getting the brush off from everyone until Johnson gave her the last three dollars in his pocket. Immediately, the woman reached out and gave him a huge bear hug. Johnson says, "That should be a heart-warming story,

right? But it wasn't. I just froze inside and thought, 'Oh please, stop! Yuck! I'm going to have to wash my hands now!'" Then, as a sort of throwaway line at the end, he adds, "You know I think that's what church ought to be: the place where we're not completely comfortable with all the people sitting near us, where we look around and say, 'Huh. So they really mean *everyone's* welcome.'"