

## 12. God Chooses the Lowly

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*Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?*

*(James 2:5-7)*

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### God Chooses the Lowly

James has warned in the preceding verses against favoritism, in particular, favoring the rich over the poor. In 2:5-7, James states three reasons why favoritism should not be shown. The first reason is that favoring the rich contradicts the style of God's work, for the Lord most often chooses the poor. That is the matter indicated in the text. The other two reasons are that favoritism is a breaking of the law of love and it brings to fore the divine rule that we will be judged in accordance with how we have judged others. If we are not merciful to those less fortunate, how can we expect God to be merciful to us on the Day of Judgment?

We will deal now with the first element: God most often chooses the poor. This is not a matter of coincidence, but a matter of God's wise and sovereign counsel. God's Word is not a social Gospel, as some explainers have suggested, but a royal Gospel. In seeking the poor first, God does not bypass those who are rich. The Gospel is to be proclaimed to everyone without discrimination, in the same earnest manner, with the call to repent and believe. But when we look at the result of this calling by the Gospel, we see that the poor respond the most. This is the case not only because of God's sovereignty, but also because his Word carries a powerful message: to be somebody in God's kingdom, we must be nobody in this world.

We come here to one of the key matters in James' letter as well as in the other Scriptures. The Lord has compassion on those who are despised by other people. He seeks broken and contrite hearts, people who judge with mercy and

who are truly open to the needs of others. He does not accept people who work with a “closed shop” mentality. The church is not a union but a communion; it is not an interest group for some, but a place for all who are open to the riches of God in Christ. In the warning against favoritism, James uncovers the heart of the Gospel: God chooses the lowly, but he opposes the proud (Ps 138:3, *Book of Praise*).

### **Somebody Out of Nobody**

We note again how James goes to work in a very pastoral manner. First of all, he repeats the designation “brothers”. In this address, he also uses the word “dear” or “beloved”. And he exhorts his readers to listen. By presenting the matter in this manner, James demonstrates again how serious it is for the church. The word “listen” means that everyone must pay very close attention, for this is a crucial point.

The first question that James asks is: “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world....?” It is almost as if James is saying, “Look around you in the churches, and you will see that the general membership is made up mostly of simple, poor folks.” This is not a matter of human circumstances—that the poor have nothing to lose and everything to gain—but this is a matter of God’s sovereign choice. The poor do not choose for the Lord out of themselves because they have nothing, but the Lord has chosen them even though they have nothing.

Note also that the text does not say that the Lord has rejected the rich. It is not as simple as the poor chosen and the rich rejected. James asks another question, “Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?” I will come back to this question later in the chapter, but we should note now that the focus is not on the contrast between rich and poor in itself, but on what God wishes to demonstrate.

We can put it simply and bluntly: the Lord wants to show the world that he can make somebody out of nobody. This is in keeping with the very heart of the Gospel: our Lord Jesus Christ emptied himself, made himself nothing, and in this way, through obedience and faith, received a name above every name.

### **Poor in the Eyes of the World**

James writes about “those who are poor in the eyes of the world.” He is writing about how the world views the poor. The world looks at the surface,

and it is easy to tell from the outside if someone is poor or not. Clothes are already a clear indicator, and whether a person has any admirable qualities or gifts from God is irrelevant. Being poor is obviously a matter of being cursed by whatever “gods” exist, for the world view is that there is no potential when there is no wealth.

But these poor people are precisely the ones chosen by God. And what is God’s intention with them? To make them wealthy in a worldly sense? We know that some religious movements use wealth, or the promise of wealth, as a manner of captivating people. God, however, wants to make his children rich in faith, in Christ. They are blessed with the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting. They receive riches that cannot be lost or tarnished, but that remain theirs forever.

James adds, “...and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him.” This kingdom is the glorious messianic kingdom that comes through the work of the great Son of David, the Messiah. To inherit the kingdom means to live with the Lord and all of God’s children on the new earth. We cannot earn this kingdom or pay our way into it, for it is received only through inheritance. God gives it by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We noted earlier the similarities between James letter’ and the “Sermon on the Mount”. The word “poor” here reminds us of the Beatitudes, where we read, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt 5:3, 5). It is likely that James himself heard that sermon, as it took place in Galilee at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. It is impressive, authoritative, and basic preaching about the kingdom of God.

I pointed out in the previous chapter that there were many poor people in the early Christian church. There were some wealthy people, but the majority of the congregation consisted of the common folk. We can look also at I Corinthians 1:26-31. Paul was dealing with a situation in the church at Corinth where many members were elevating themselves above others because of their spiritual gifts. The apostle Paul rejected this unspiritual striving and he reminded the Corinthians of their humble beginnings. He wrote to them, “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the

lowly things of the world and the despised things -and the things that are not to nullify the things that are.”

### **Why Does God Choose the Poor?**

God chose those who were not wise, influential, or of noble birth. The church was largely formed of the rabble, and in that sense it did not have a good name or a worthy social position. Nevertheless the people were *called*. They were the church of Christ, for the church consists of those called out of this world.

The source of the gathering of the church lies in calling and choosing. It is remarkable that those called and chosen are generally poor, unlearned, without influence, lowly, and common. Why is this? What is behind this manner of divine working? James does not provide us with a specific answer, but Paul does in I Corinthians 1:29-31: “...so that no one may boast before [God].” God says, “I’ll take people who have nothing and are nothing, so that they may realize and understand that I alone make them into something by faith.” The outcome is then that “him who boasts, [boasts] in the LORD.”

We must boast in the LORD and be humble and lowly before him. I think of Jeremiah 9:23-24, where we read, “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts, boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the LORD.” We must be lowly, for by grace we are saved, through faith.

“I am the LORD, the God of kindness, of grace, and of justice, of truth and faithfulness.” No one shall take any credit for being saved or for their place in the church, because there is no boasting before the Lord. He did it, and he alone, in his kindness and justice. This is indeed the heart of the Gospel, *solus Deo Gloria*. I mentioned that Martin Luther thought that James stressed our works too much and that this emphasis might lead to boasting in oneself, but James writes exactly the opposite.

God chooses those who cannot save themselves. This is also a refrain in the Psalms of Israel: “His goodness I proclaim, I glory in the LORD” (Ps 34:1, *Book of Praise*). Look also at Psalm 44:8: “In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.” The LORD takes the lowly and puts them on a pedestal. He makes their name great. He places them high upon a hill or on a rock, as the Psalms say, and those who are blessed in this manner may never look down on others for they know how

they got there. Christians may never forget their common origin with the rest of mankind that lies under the righteous curse of God. There is only one ground on which God chooses: his sovereign grace in Christ, who also was lowly and humble. To be with him we have to become like him, lowly and humble, loving and not judging.

### **Insulting the Poor and Favoring the Rich**

James writes in 2:6, “But you have insulted the poor.” He means here that the second man in his example, the one who comes in and is told to stand at the back or sit on the floor, is insulted. The man himself may not feel insulted, or he may simply shrug his shoulders over it because he is used to such treatment, but the Lord Jesus considers it an insult. Christ deems that the man has not been esteemed in his proper value, his value in God’s eyes.

We may never insult anyone, that is, not give them proper respect and estimation. This is especially the case when it concerns a believer. A brother or sister in the Lord must always be treated as such. We may never treat one another according to worldly standards, thinking, “He is poor, so he does not count.” A poor brother is still a brother. A lowly sister is still a sister in the Lord. Let us never forget this or we will insult others, and in the process insult the Lord Jesus, who is their Savior as well as ours.

James then proceeds to demonstrate how foolish it is to favor the rich because of their riches. He asks, “Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the one who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?” Exploitation means benefiting from people’s weaknesses in order to gain even more control over them. James asks, “Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?” Many of the rich people of his time were landlords who demanded high rent, whether or not the harvest failed. If a man fell hopelessly behind in his obligations, he was dragged to court, charged, fined, and imprisoned or sold as a slave.

The poor did not do this to one another. They had no houses or land to rent out and no accounts to settle. The poor had enough work just staying afloat. As is often the case because of the nature of economics—we need money to make money—the rich became richer, and the poor became poorer. It was, and still is in many cases, a vicious circle.

I mentioned that there were many poor people in the church who understood exactly what James was telling them. Perhaps the worst of all for them was that, as they were being exploited and mistreated, the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, “the one to whom [they belonged,]” was being slandered.

Some of them were slaves, but, as James acknowledges, their real master was Christ. And Christ's name was being slandered by their earthly masters or rulers. They might have said, " Ever since you've become a Christian, you don't work as hard as before. You have become lazy. You are more focused on this church than on your job. What kind of person is this Jesus that you do not pay your bills but do give to the church? He does not come first, I do!"

Not only were the poor being insulted, but their Lord and Master was being slandered. Under the name of Jesus, they were made to suffer even more. Jesus' name was being blasphemed by the rich who wanted to keep them enslaved.

### **How Are Rich and Poor to Come Together?**

James asks these questions to show the early Christians how wrong it was to show favor to someone just because he was rich. The rich were not morally of the best quality because of their wealth. On the contrary, they were often evil tormentors and harsh taskmasters who slandered the Savior. Yet the Christians bowed to such people when they came into church. Should they make the church into a secular society? Were they to impose their will and standard also on church life?

To ask the question is to answer it. Of course not. The rich shall know that there is one Master, Christ, and that in him we are all brothers and sisters. There may be different social positions, but they do not play a role in the church. We must be polite and respectful to our masters, especially when they are also our brothers in Christ, but the masters must know also that a believer who works for them is a brother in the Lord. In this way, we can together glorify the Name of the One to whom we belong. Then rich and poor come together before God's face and also benefit one another in the service of the Lord.

We must be very careful not to come to any wrong conclusions here. It is not a sin to be rich. It is not a crime to build up a business or have property, or whatever may add to one's income. Christ did not say that it is impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. He said, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:23).

Why is it hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven? It is because wealth tends to lead to pride and privilege. Wealth often gives a false sense of power and security. Wealth can become a goal in itself, for one's own pride, and we know that God opposes the proud.

We cannot serve God and mammon. It is true for everyone, rich or poor or in-between, but in a stronger sense for those who are rich. We have to be

careful—for we are in general an affluent people—that the love of God is not replaced by the love of money.

We are to help one another in the communion of saints. Those who are poor shall be rich in Christ. Those who are rich, also rich in the Lord, shall share of their blessings with those in need, and they shall do so without favoritism. Together we shall be diligent in our calling, so that the Lord may bless us. Then every one of us will be able to function in the church of Christ and in this world.