



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Partiality Is Not God's Way

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In the section of *Mere Christianity* in which he discussed what Christians believe, C. S. Lewis dealt with the matter of sin, devoting one chapter to the fact that “an evil power has made himself for the present the Prince of this world” (Lewis 1952, 51). Satan has done his best work, Lewis noted, by taking advantage of human freedom; because each of us is an “individual self,” there is a real possibility that we will put ourselves first at the center of our world. That has never turned out well, as Lewis explains:

What Satan put into the heads of our remote ancestors was the idea that they could “be like gods”—could set up on their own as if they had created themselves—be their own masters—invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy (Lewis 1952, 53-54).

Notice how many of the things Lewis includes in our “long terrible story” directly or implicitly involve putting others down, the flip side of self-exaltation. Almost invariably, when we humans presume to take God's place, we show partiality, “ma[king] distinctions among [our]selves and becom[ing] judges with evil thoughts” (Jas 2.4). But partiality does not match God's nature and so should have no place among those who “hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 1). Using

three rhetorical questions—each expecting an affirmative answer—James 2.5–7 shows why this is so.

Three Revealing Questions

“Listen,” James says, to rhetorical question number 1: “has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?” (v. 5). This question draws on the reversal-of-fortune theme that runs throughout biblical thought. God has always had a particular concern for the poor (and others on the margins), so much so that it became common to identify the poor with the pious (cf. Deut 10.18; Pss 10; 37.8–17; 40.17; 72.2, 86.5; Isa 29.19). This reversal theme remained prominent in Second Temple Jewish literature (e.g., Sirach 4.8–10; 13.3–8, 17–20; cited [here](#)).

We also see it in the teaching of Jesus who emphasized that the world’s poor are the ones promised blessings and rewarded for piety (cf. Matt 25.31, 34; Luke 6.20, 24). The classic example is the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man who had received good things in this life found himself in torment in the next; the beggar Lazarus whose life was filled with bad things in this life found himself living in comfort in the next (Luke 16.19–31). (One of the features of Luke is his emphasis on Jesus’s interest in society’s outsiders and the reversal theme, seen in his use of “the poor” to effectively stand for all who are marginalized; see Green 1995, 79-84.)

According to James, it is unreasonable to favor the rich over the poor (see vv. 2–3) because God has “chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom” (Jas 2.5). The verb *chosen* (ἐκλέγομαι, *eklegomai*) is significant, the idea of election being deeply embedded in Jewish and Christian thought. Moses, for example, told the Israelites that it was not their numerical strength that explained their privileged place, but the fact that “the Lord set his love on you and chose [בָּחַרְךָ, *bāḥar*; LXX *eklegomai*] you” (Deut 7.7; cf. 4.37; 14.2). Election is also a recurring theme in the New Testament (cf. Acts 13.17; 15.7; 1 Pet 2.9; Eph 1.4) where, again, one of God’s favored groups is the poor (e.g., 1 Cor 1.26–31; 2 Cor 8.9; Acts 11.29; cf. Deut 16.3; 26.7).

The point is not that the poor were favored simply because they were poor, but because they exhibited a greater tendency to be “rich in faith,” the response that makes it possible to be “heirs of the kingdom” (Jas 2.5). Douglas Moo elaborates:

Neither Jesus nor James means that the poor are promised the kingdom simply because they are poor.... It is a generalization and, as such, cannot be understood as including every single poor person, nor as excluding all rich people. While Jesus’ warning about riches being a stumbling-block to discipleship must be taken with utter seriousness (cf. Mk. 10:23; Lk. 12:34), neither he nor James excludes rich people from the kingdom. James does not say that *only* poor people are *chosen*; his point is to remind his readers that *many* are, and that this fact implicitly condemns Christian discrimination against them (Moo 1985, 91-92).

Both the irony and gravity of the sin of James's readers were pronounced: "But you have dishonored the poor man" (Jas 2.6). That is, they were dishonoring the one upon whom God had bestowed the greatest honor while "siding with the very class which both historically and at present persecutes the impoverished believer" (Davids 1982, 112).

The folly of their sin is revealed in James's second rhetorical question: "Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?" (Jas 2.6b). He presupposes a background in which those who were considered to be of little importance in this world found the promises of the gospel attractive (cf. 1 Cor 1.26–31). And the churches in and near Jerusalem, where James resided (cf. Acts 15.13; 21.17–18), should have understood this better than most. The Antioch church had sent relief to them during the famine of the mid-40s (Acts 11.27–30) and they were the beneficiaries of Paul's extensive effort to collect funds from Gentile churches to aid "the poor among the saints at Jerusalem" (Rom 15.26). As Moo explains,

The strongly marked socio-economic class distinction presented in James corresponds closely to what we know of conditions in first-century Palestine. A small group of wealthy landowners and merchants accumulated more and more power, while large numbers of people were forced from their land and grew even poorer. Most of James' readers probably belonged to the class of poor agricultural labourers (Moo 1985, 92).

James's third rhetorical question exposes the greater concern: "Are they [the rich] not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?" (Jas 2.7). Those who were showing partiality in the assembly "have made the church into a tool of persecution; they have, in effect, sided with the devil against God" (Davids 1982, 112). "Blaspheme" (*βλασφημέω*, *blasphēmeō*), "to demean through speech" was "an esp[ecially] sensitive matter in an honor-shame oriented society" (Bauer 2000, 178), not least in this case because the one being demeaned was "the excellent name that was invoked over you" (2.7 NRSV). "Invoked over you" is a more precise translation of the phrase, *ἐπικληθὲν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς* (*epiklēthen eph humas*). It is virtually the same phrase quoted from Amos 9.12 (see the LXX) in Acts 15.17 in James's address to the Jerusalem meeting that was convened to discuss whether Gentiles would be admitted to the church without first being circumcised (Acts 15.1–6). The phrase was a common Hebrew idiom "frequently found in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between Yahweh and his people" (Moo 1985, 93). Now, as James 2.1 indicates, the revered name was that of Jesus, the Messiah. Peter Davids notes how serious their offense was:

Thus the blasphemy referred to indicates the reviling of the name of Jesus (whether explicitly or by implication, e.g. "those followers of a cursed criminal"), which was the baptismal "seal" of the Christian. By siding with the rich the church was siding with blasphemers! James has held the worst charge until last (Davids 192, 113-114).

Questions for Reflection

In a society often declared to be the richest in the world, and one where partiality, both socio-economic and otherwise, continues to be a problem, James's exposure of the inconsistency of partiality should give us pause.

In our world, are there poor, and others on the margin, who are oppressed or subjected to prejudicial comments and behaviors? Do people who profess the name of Jesus ever participate? Is it possible for God's people to be passive participants in the problem—not propagating it, but not actively opposing it either? In light of the consistent prophetic teaching which shows God's regard for the poor and opposition to injustice (cf. Amos, James), are we neglecting an important part of our mission by not being more active against injustice? Is it an appropriate concern for the church as we relate to the society at large—part of being salt and light? Or is it sufficient only to confront it when practiced among us?

I offer no resolutions here but surely these questions deserve additional study and thought.

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"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' April 9, 2024"
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