



pride, prejudice, and poverty

grappling with economic favoritism in our churches
commentary from christopher smith

My brothers, do not try to combine faith in Jesus Christ, our glorified Lord, with the making of distinctions between classes of people. Now suppose a man comes into your synagogue, beautifully dressed and with a gold ring on, and at the same time a poor man comes in, in shabby clothes, and you take notice of the well-dressed man and say, "Come this way to the best seats"; then you tell the poor man, "Stand over there" or "You can sit on the floor at my footrest. Can't you see that you have used two different standards in your mind?"

James 2:1-4



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Unlike the audience of James' epistle, most churches today do not have a problem with preferred and second-class seating. However, careful observation reveals other ways in which our congregations succumb to economic favoritism.

Are we as quick to greet the poor stranger
as we are to greet the rich or famous one?

If a celebrity visited our congregation,
would he or she receive a different welcome
than the person who comes to us in
tattered clothing reeking of alcohol?

Similarly, what types of people in our churches
do we seek out as friends, or what types do
we want to get to know better?

Economic favoritism also surfaces in the ways in which we fellowship together. Without thinking about it, we often fellowship in ways or places (e.g., restaurants or golf courses) that might financially exclude some members of our congregation.

the origins of our favoritism

Regardless of the form in which it emerges, economic favoritism is -- and has been -- a powerful temptation for the Church. The "making of distinctions between classes of people" that James warns against is rooted

in the basic sin of pride. It is pride that makes us believe that we are superior to others. C. S. Lewis wrote in [Mere Christianity](#):

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others.

Once pride has planted the seeds of superiority in our minds, we find ourselves prone to looking down upon those whom we deem to be lower than ourselves. Paul urges Timothy to beware of the dangers of this sort of sin:

Warn those who are rich in this world's goods
that they are not to look down on other people;
and not to set their hopes on money,
which is untrustworthy, but on God who,
out of his riches, gives us all we need
for our happiness.

| I Tim 6:17 |

The Greek word translated as "look down on" in this verse is "kataphroneo," which from its roots means to "think down upon" or "judge to be beneath oneself." The image conjured up by this verb is one of prejudice, an unfounded and unfair judgment of someone. Thus, we see Paul sternly warning against the prejudicial divisiveness that so often emerges as the fruit of pride.

moving beyond our favoritism

Although economic favoritism, arising out the pride and prejudice of our fallen condition, is an ever-present temptation for the Church, we need not resign ourselves to its vices. In fact, many churches have recognized their own favoritism and are beginning to wrestle with it, taking steps toward minimizing its control. One prominent cultural snare that can lead us into economic favoritism is that of "upward mobility." If one is always focused on moving up the prestige scale, he or she will likely have little concern for those deemed to be lower on the scale.

I was once involved in a suburban church in which, over the course of about a year, there was a great deal of teaching on simplicity. A significant number of people in that congregation had open hearts to that teaching and began to seek ways in which they could live more simply. Led by the Spirit, many of these people began to set aside some of the

upward aspirations that drove their lives. In the wake of these changes arose new levels of compassion for the poor that were not present in that congregation before. Although the demographics of this church remained vastly middle-class, there was a distinct change in its attitude toward the poor, and today that congregation contains a small, but growing, number of poorer worshippers. Even more encouraging than these numbers is the attitude maintained toward these poorer congregates. They are eagerly listened to and cared for, and there seems to be a genuine excitement about their participation in that church.

Another factor contributing to many churches' preference for the rich, is their isolation from the poor. One facet of this isolation is geographical; many suburban churches are located in places that make it difficult, if not impossible, for those without cars or without the means for public transportation to attend. Through an astounding series of events, the congregation that I described above -- which was quite aware of its own isolation -- has recently been led to plant a new congregation in an abandoned church building much nearer to the heart of its city. This new location will certainly be much more accessible to the poor than its current meeting place, and there is much hope that fellowship with the poor will continue to blossom in the midst of that congregation.

A second facet of the isolation problem is relational. If one has no relationships with the poor outside the church (as coworkers, as neighbors, etc.), can we expect that he or she will have healthy relationships with the poor inside the church. The congregation in which I currently worship gathers in a particularly needy neighborhood. Over the last several years, there have been a significant number of people in that church who have relocated, buying homes and moving into this neighborhood. Perhaps none of the people who relocated did so with the intention of increasing their fellowship with the poor, but that undoubtedly has been an effect of their move. As these relocated members of the church developed relationships with their poorer neighbors, the church experienced a booming food distribution outreach in the neighborhood, as well as a growing number of poorer neighbors being warmly welcomed as active participants in its congregation.

Another way in which we show our favoritism to the rich is by choosing means of fellowship that are inaccessible to the poor. Gathering at restaurants after a worship service, as some churches do, is one activity that would prohibit the regular participation of anyone on a tight budget. Golf leagues are another example of fellowship that would exclude most poorer members of our churches due to the high cost of equipment and fees. While there is certainly nothing wrong with any of these types of fellowship, we need to be aware that some worshippers are being excluded and not let ourselves fall into a pattern of habitually excluding our poorer brothers and sisters from our church's fellowship. Although potluck dinners may be scorned as old-fashioned in some circles, they are an excellent means of fellowship that does not exclude anyone in the congregation. The church to which I currently belong likes to refer to itself as "an association of house churches." Many of these house-churches regularly share meals together, and the typical understanding is that all members are welcome, even if they cannot bring food to share.

stewardship and radical equality

Despite the fact that churches -- in our day as well as James' day -- are prone to favor the rich, there is no biblical basis for such a preference. In fact, the Bible repeatedly emphasizes precisely the opposite point -- the equality of all believers (cf. Ephesians 6:8 and Colossians 3:11). Although it might not immediately be evident, stewardship -- a prominent doctrine in many churches -- is essential to understanding James's stance against economic favoritism. Most Christians in the United States would likely acknowledge that stewardship guides, or at least should guide, their economic practice. Indeed, the Greek word for steward, "oikonomos," is the word in which the English word "economics" has its origin. It is common in many American churches to understand stewardship primarily as the wise allocation of one's financial and material assets. Certainly, this aspect is essential to the doctrine of stewardship, but when stewardship is presented in the Bible, it is done so within a larger context.

There are two equally critical principles that are foundational to stewardship and that are often overlooked in many churches today. The first of these is that of God's richness; as its Creator, God is the owner of the Earth and everything in it (Psalm 24:1). The second principle is that of the universal poverty of the individual, which is a corollary to the principle of God's richness. This principle reminds us that if all the Earth's riches are God's, then none of them are our own, and thus regardless of our income, we all are poor! The doctrine of stewardship is built on a firm understanding of these two principles. Thus, if all riches are God's and we cannot lay claim to any of them, then we must understand ourselves as stewards (or managers) of the assets that God has entrusted to each of us. If we, the Church, accept the principle of the universal poverty of the individual as an essential part of the doctrine of stewardship, then we have no basis for favoring the rich. Indeed, the Kingdom of God is characterized by its equality; since all human beings are utterly poor, we have no basis, as Christians, for seeing ourselves as better than any other human being.

repenting of our favoritism

It is clear from James's words, as well as the rest of Scripture (cf. I Timothy 5:21, Luke 14:12-14), that the Church is to show no preference for the rich. Thus, our churches must continually be investigating ways in which they might be favoring their rich worshippers. As should be the case with any sin, once a congregation finds itself convicted of favoritism, there is a need for confession and repentance. As part of our repentance, we must embrace a complete understanding of the doctrine of stewardship including the radical vision of equality that it entails. Change will not always come easily, particularly in the current American society obsessed with upward mobility, but the above stories remind us that we can move beyond our economic favoritism. Our God is one of hope, and in God's infinite power we will be able to repent of our pride and our favoritism and return to the high calling of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom marked by its radical equality!

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