

'Being Impressed By Wealth And Position'

Last time in James we looked at chapter 2:1-5: 'Indiscriminate Love' I called the sermon. After telling us what false religion looks like chapter 1:26, and what genuine faith looks like chapter 1:27, James then exemplifies those very things as he addresses his hearers as "My brothers" v1, "My beloved brothers" v5. Even though he had difficult things to say to them, he does so with that tight rein, because although there are different roles and different giftings within the church, we are all Brethren. We are all equal. Equally condemned because of sin, and also equally saved because of God's love to us through Jesus! He speaks of us all being "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." Yes we are all Brethren, and Jesus alone is glorious.

And with all of that in mind in v1 he says: "don't show favouritism" or partiality. And he gives them the example in v2-3 of the well-dressed man with gold on his fingers alongside the "poor man in shabby" or dirty clothes. The rich man gets all of their attention, while the poor man, well, he can be a "footstool" for the people's feet! But why was this discrimination such a wicked thing in the sight of God? v4, "because we have become judges with evil thoughts." Judging whether or not this person or that person is or is not worthy of God's mercy and grace, merely by the way they look or are dressed. And in so doing, we can forget who we all are: simply forgiven sinners. At the same time we are also standing up on that holy ground of knowing who are and who are not: Christ's own people. Jesus alone gets to stand there, that's holy ground: John 6:37 "All that the father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."

Then in v5 James gives us two other reasons why this discrimination is so wicked. Firstly, because God had "chosen" them therefore Jesus had died for them! So to look with contempt upon these poor Brethren, simply due to their social standing was a great evil. And secondly, they may well be those very ones whom God had made "rich in faith" and "heirs of His Kingdom." Yes they may be those ones whom God has empowered richly and through whom He is going to do mighty things among us! So just as Jesus has done for us, we must love unconditionally all of those who come to us in His Name, and "never drive them away." Yes we must love all of those who come through our doors, indiscriminately!

And so we pick it up in v6, and I've given this sermon the heading 'Being Impressed By Wealth and Position'. Verse 6: "You have insulted (*meaning dishonoured*) the poor." Brothers and sisters, here is the other side of that coin of unloveliness. Or as I referred to it last time, the polluting of our minds by the world in which we live. Not that moral pollution, but that contempt and indifference, yes that unloveliness and hardness of heart toward others. Because not only had they not welcomed the poor as they had the wealthy people, (even though God had chosen them and Jesus had died for them) but they had actually even "insulted" those lowly Brethren they had "dishonoured" them! Yes they have "dishonoured" them. They have robbed them of their honour, their dignity, and their sense of self.

Now brothers and sisters, what an evil thing this is. And it really is an epidemic in our modern world. There is such little respect anymore in our country it seems. And this is evident throughout all aspects of our society! When I was growing up, it was expected, no, it was demanded, that we would have respect towards our teachers or there would be consequences. That was a good thing. On buses or trains or in the shops, there were certain behaviours that were and were not tolerated. And again that was a good thing. You would never think of smart-mouthing or swearing at a policeman. And if someone did something that merited a clip around the ears as a young person, a copper may

well do that very thing, to remind them of who they were: a kid who needed to learn what's what. And once again, I believe that was a good thing!

But I remember something so vividly that happened 30 odd years ago. A young juvenile offender was hauled before a judge for unruly behaviour and for hurling obscenities at the arresting officer. Even though there were witnesses to the whole thing, so case closed you would think, but no. The judge ruled that since such language was now part of common speech, it was not deemed to be an offence. All charges were dropped! The way people speak to the police and public servants today is mind blowing. Again, this lack of respect, is reflected in all aspects of our society. Students toward their teachers. Parents toward teachers. Children towards their parents and parents towards their children. The way some parents addressed their children is appalling. Obscenity after obscenity. The contempt, disrespect and outright criminality directed toward the elderly with impunity is a national disgrace. Some weeks ago, an older man was standing at the curb of a road simply minding his own business. Two young thugs ran up behind him and pushed him over to steal his camera, and they actually killed him. There is no accountability friends, that's why this sort of thing happens! Yes our society permits people to rob others of their honour, their dignity and their sense of self-worth without any ramifications.

In contrast James says to his people, (paraphrased) *'this is what you guys are doing to them for whom Christ died. This must never be.'* Friends can you see? They had not only shown favour and gushed all over the rich, but they had robbed the poor brethren of the little dignity that was afforded to them. And they'd robbed them, yes they dishonoured them in that one place where they should have felt safe and free of such things. Amongst the Church of Christ. His Body no less!

Beloved if all of this were not bad enough, James now points out the kinds of people that they were showing favour towards, in preference over those genuine but lowly Brethren. Verse 6b: "Is it not the rich who are exploiting (or oppressing) you?" Yes, such is the character of those splendidly dressed gold wearing gentlemen with whom you are so enamoured, that they are the very ones who are "oppressing the church and dragging them before the courts." The 'judgement seats' says Matthew Henry!

John Blanchard explains that James is referring to those many instances of the religious elite persecuting and attacking the church, by dragging the Apostles and the Brethren before the ruling councils. Peter and John and others were jailed and flogged more than once; Stephen was put to death before the Sanhedrin. Saul's murderous rampage against the church before he was converted, "dragging off men and women" we read. And "giving approval to Stephen's death." And what of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself? While yes being all a part of God's plan, He too was "dragged off" by the religious elite. And yet these were the kinds of men who were receiving preferential treatment from the believers! Paul confesses in Acts 26:10: "on the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death I cast my vote against them." John Calvin puts it like this: 'It seems odd to honour one's executioners while in the meantime to injure one's own friends.'

But Beloved, why is it that by our nature, there seems to be a part in all of us to different degrees, which is so impressed by such things? The big house, the flash cars, even that self-confident arrogance which seems to pour forth from many of these kinds of people? Why can we be so impressed by such things, which clearly those scattered parishioners of James were. Let's remember that they were "the scattered ones," those of the "diaspora" They were the ones who the religious elite wanted to "drag before the courts." Well, brethren, may I suggest that the answer is found in the words, by our nature. As we have seen many times from Romans 7 Paul had his own struggles

with his old self. Romans 7:15 "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." And there is no doubt in my mind that while we live in this world and this life we will continue to have that struggle. And if there is no struggle, then we are in great danger of being swallowed up by that world, with its ways of our old lives!

For whatever reason, (maybe it was a cultural thing, we don't know) for James' parishioners it was I guess, being almost in awe, of those well-dressed movers and shakers of the day. Even those power brokers of their time. But friends no doubt some of them were genuine believers in the born again sense, as we saw last week when looking briefly at Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. But yes there seems to have been this being awestruck by let's call them the lifestyles of the rich and famous. But again, let's take a look at the character of some of these people!

Firstly, they are "dragging the believers into court" for their genuine faith. And in v7 "Are they not the ones who are slandering, (the word is actually *Blasphemousin*, so blaspheming) the noble name of him to whom you belong?" Brothers and sisters, you would think that this would be impossible to take place among the believers. To honour those who would "blaspheme" our Lord! But it isn't you see. And perhaps never more so than today. There seems to be this almost kind of hero worship of rich people, rich preachers, dare I even say rich false preachers etc. Maybe there is this inner desire that the secret of their success may somehow rub off on us, I don't know. But what I do know, is that I don't want their deception to rub off on me! And I have no doubt that none of us would think of ourselves this way, or that we think are in danger of falling into that trap. But there are many, many, many, millions of people who claim Christ that have done so! But those rock'n'roll type preachers are a "blasphemy," be not mistaken. More and more things are being revealed about many of these so called megachurches. The misappropriation of funds and fraud. Sexual impropriety of the worst kind, even rape allegations. And even the systematic covering up and concealing of these evil things!

In Romans 2:24, in his condemnation of some of those who claimed Christ, Paul writes, as he draws on Isaiah 52:5 "My name is blasphemed among the gentiles because of you." There does seem to be this lure, even this evil attraction toward those things that though they be openly blasphemous, while having some appearance of Christianity, they have nothing to do with Jesus. It might be religion, but it's not Christianity!

Friends, Thomas Manton makes the point that we should all be very aware and wary of: How we carry the Name of Christ. He recounts the story of Alexander the Great. Who upon discovering that he had another Alexander in his command, called him to himself saying, 'See to it that you do nothing unworthy of the name, Alexander.' How much more then Brethren that we should see to it that we do or say nothing that would dishonour the name of Christ. Because all of us who claim ourselves to be Christian, carry the Name of Christ. And if we do so, we must do it in a worthy manner!

And yet how difficult a thing in many ways this is to do today. When to "blaspheme" His Name is a national sport. Indeed His Name is used as the most evil of profanities. Yet the third commandment tells us: "you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. For the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." And from Philippians 2:10-11 "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Yes how we carry His Name matters to the King. As we saw last week from Mark 8:38: "I tell you the truth, anyone who is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." Again in James 2:7 "Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?" Blanchard even suggests, that this is a direct

reference to the fact that we are “baptised into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” So then the carrying of Jesus` Name, which we received at our baptism, (and which points directly to our being cleansed from sin through that shedding of His Blood) must then be evidenced in our lives!

James continues in 2:8-9: “if you really keep the royal law found in the scripture. Love your neighbour as yourself, you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin, and are counted as lawbreakers.” You see, not only are they dishonouring the poor by their careless and heartless treatment of them. But what they were doing, was also contrary to all of God's teachings throughout the whole of the Bible, which speak of His people actually caring for the poor! But why is it called “the royal law?” Well simply because it was given by God the Father, and owned by His Son our King!

Friends it's interesting that today, many preachers and teachers don't want to talk about sin, or the breaking of God`s Law. And yet if we neglect to talk about sin, Christ`s coming is meaningless. We've just celebrated Easter which is all about the reality and necessity of the Cross. If we needed a Saviour, it stands to reason that there is indeed something that we needed to be saved from. Sin is the breaking of God's law, and sinfulness is lawlessness. Yes it is the breaking of God's law. But unlike the laws of society, the Law of God exists as one body, or as a whole. It cannot be broken down. If we break one, we in effect break them all. As James now explains in v10-11. And what he is actually doing here, is addressing that attitude within us, which Satan just loves to fan with his whispers. That has us justify certain behaviours and actions, even sins, buy some self-delusional idea, that the ends justify the means!

Here`s an extreme example. I say to myself, ‘I will go and gamble all of my finances’ because I'm going to use all of my winnings to give to the poor. Maybe I'll get involved with something that is slightly less than legal, because again, all the proceeds I'm going to put in the church plate. It's a sinful self-delusion, because our intention has nothing to do with the poor, it's all about satisfying some kind of selfish lust within us! James is telling his hearers that their over the top friendliness and adoration toward one group of people, (just like those evil preachers who twist the Word of God for dishonest gain) had nothing to do with “loving your neighbour as yourself,” no. Your intent is to ingratiate yourselves with those wealthy people.

Even if their motives were pure, (which they were not) would not excuse the horrendous and callous way they have treated the poor brethren of Christ. Partiality is a sin, a breaking of God's law! And although we may feel that we are being obedient to Jesus in other areas of our life, to neglect any of God's statutes is a neglect, (and in effect) a breaking of them all. Because they are all one, even as the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit are one. And to break one of those laws separates us from God. That is James point here! Thomas Manton explains that we shouldn't be obsessed or concerned with the different kinds of sins so much, whether one is more offensive than the other, even though this is certainly true. We should more be concerned with the words in v11: “for he who said,” because the desire of the genuine believer is always going to be obedient to all that “God has said.” Even though we fail miserably!

In reality, James is addressing the sin of hypocrisy, that wearing of different kinds of masks. Professing to be something outwardly with our lips, and yet being something completely different on the inside. And this is of course reflected in what we do. And with the issue before us being how the believers were preferring the wealthy above the poor!

Chapter 1:19: “my dear brothers take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” Chapter 1:26: “if anyone considers himself religious and yet does not

keep a tight rein on his tongue he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.” And now chapter 2:12: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged.”

Yes, our words as well as our actions, are going to fall under the judgement of God! In v4 James said: “Have you not discriminated amongst yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

Remember, judging whether or not this person or that person is or is not worthy of God's mercy, simply by looking at their outward appearance and the way they dress. Well in relation to that: “being judges with evil thoughts,” now he says rather v12 “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.” Yes, “speak and act.” Chapter 1:22: “Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” Yes “speak and act,” not as “judges with evil thoughts” but as “those who are going to be judged.”

Now brothers and sisters, we need to understand that since James is writing to Christians, he is not talking about being judged as to whether or not we are going to heaven or hell, no. Jesus has paid the price for our sin, so we are glory bound. Praise God!

But there is a judgement that yet remains for the Christian. And it is this: Have those things that we have said and done since we've carried the Name of Christ, been worthy of that, Name so to speak? The Law of God no longer condemns us, Jesus has fulfilled that Law on the Cross. It is now for the believer “the law of freedom.” And it has freed us up, to love. Because we have been first loved by God through Jesus! But if we use that freedom for gossip, for slander, for hurtful words and actions, those things then will indeed be judged by God, when each one of us stands before His throne. So we must “speak and act as those who are going to be judged.” Already set free and forgiven for sin, but for our words and actions, we will be held to account!

James sums the section up in v13: “Because judgement without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgement.” Friends may I suggest that we have two truths coexisting in this final verse. Firstly, there is indeed a judgement, that is coming from God upon the whole of humanity. Because of His Holiness and righteousness God must judge rebellion and sin. And He has done that at the Cross. But His mercy in Jesus for the believer, has “triumphed over that judgement.”

And secondly: Therefore we too must not be “judges with evil thoughts” towards our Brethren, because if the judgement of our evil thoughts triumphs over our merciful thoughts, then we are not who we claim to be! No, the mercy that we have received from God because of Jesus, must be that same mercy which we have toward one another. Yes our merciful thoughts, must and will triumph over our evil judgmental thoughts. Again, in that same way that God's mercy to us through Jesus, has “triumphed over His judgement” towards us! Jesus summed it up in His Sermon on the mount: Matthew 5:7: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” So we are not to be impressed by the wealth or position of others, no. We are to love as Christ has loved us! Blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy.”

Let's pray!