

THE CHURCH IS IMPARTIAL

JAMES 2 v 1-4

My dear brothers and sisters, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, you must never treat people in different ways according to their outward appearance. Suppose a rich man wearing a gold ring and fine clothes comes to your meeting and a poor man in ragged clothes also comes. If you show more respect to the well-dressed man and say to him, “Have this best seat here”, but say to the poor man, “Stand over there, or sit here on the floor by my feet”, then you are guilty of creating distinctions among yourselves and of making judgements based on evil motives.

When he was a student, the famous Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, considered becoming a Christian. He read the gospels and was moved by them. It seemed to him that Christianity offered a solution to the caste system that plagued the people of India. One Sunday, he went to a local church. He had decided to see the pastor and ask for instruction on the way of salvation. But when he entered the church, which consisted of white people only, the ushers refused to give him a seat. They told him to go and worship with his own people. He left the church and never went back. Later, as he reflected on his shocking experience, he said; **“If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu”**.

This very sad story illustrates the sin that James tackles in his letter; 2 v 1. James’ focus is on the sin of showing partiality to the rich and despising the poor, but his words apply to all types of prejudice, whether it is based on economic status, race or any other category. To favour some people and to disregard others, based on outward factors, is a terrible sin that plagued the early church in James’ day. It has plagued the church in every generation since. The sin of partiality persists in subtle and sometimes blatant ways in many of our churches, including many evangelical churches. There is a church growth movement that has sprung up in recent years that emphasises ‘the homogeneous unit principle’. It is based on the observation that people like to worship with ‘their own type’. Churches that subscribe to this approach target their outreach programs with the aim of reaching segments of society that they identify with. This is a way to market the church to the Baby Boomers or Gen X or Gen Y or Gen Z. Each of these social groups has their own demographic preferences. I read recently about churches that aim to reach the up-and-outers who apparently are very rich people who seem to have everything in their lives but God. It’s highly probable that such churches wouldn’t deliberately exclude anyone who didn’t fit their target audience, but neither would they go out of their way to make such people feel welcome and comfortable. These churches carve out their particular niche in society and do everything in their power to shape the growth of their church to fit into that niche.

All these approaches violate what James is saying. James states emphatically that partiality has no place in the church; v 1. The word ‘partiality’ translates a Greek word that literally means ‘receiving the face’. It is first used in the New Testament as a literal rendering of the Old Testament Hebrew language for partiality. To ‘receive the face’ is to make judgments and distinctions based on external considerations such as

physical appearance, social status or race. God never does this as the Old Testament affirms; Leviticus 19 v 15 *“do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great”*. Partiality based on external considerations is inconsistent with the example of Jesus who came to break down the barriers of nationality, race, class and gender; Colossians 3 v 11 *“Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or un circumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free”*.

To illustrate his point James sets out a hypothetical scenario; v 2-4. Two men come into a church service. One man is obviously very wealthy, as seen by his gold ring and elegant dress. The other man is obviously poor, as seen by his shabby clothes. Someone in the church directs the wealthy man to the best seat in the church, whereas the poor man is told to stand out of the way or to squat on the floor. The rich man is given the privilege of his wealth, but the poor man is despised because of his poverty. Such treatment, says James, is evil.

The context in which James was writing his letter was that there were social problems in the early church. The church was the one place in the ancient world where social distinctions did not exist. A master found himself sitting beside his slave. The reality was that the gap between the slave and the master was very wide and inevitably this created tensions.

Although the context of the early church is very different to our church today, the basic problem that James highlights is still very evident. Churches are categorised as upper-class, middle-class or working class. There should be no class divisions in the church. William Barclay wrote; **“The Church must be the one place where all distinctions are wiped out. There can be no distinctions of rank and prestige when men (and women) meet in the presence of the King of glory. There can be no distinctions of merit when men (and women) meet in the presence of the supreme holiness of God. In his presence all earthly distinctions are less than the dust and all earthly righteousness is as filthy rags. In the presence of God all men (and women) are one”**.

I'm absolutely sure that all of us would agree with what James is saying. But what if a homeless person, shabbily dressed and stinking of alcohol, walked into your church and sat down in the pew beside you. How would you react? Would you feel uncomfortable? Would you want the service to end as quickly as possible so that you could get away from the person? Partiality is a sin. Every church must be impartial. Everyone must be welcome in it. Amen.