

Text: James 2:5-7

Topic: the Poor

My purpose for this message: To persuade Christians to participate in giving helpful help to the poor.

Delivered: Oct. 23, 2005 @ KEFC

Church Snobbery (part 2)

PRAY.

2 weeks ago we were in James 2:1-13 and I preached part 1 on Church Snobbery; today is part 2, vv.5-7. Webster's Dictionary says a snob "tends to rebuff, avoid or ignore those he/she regards as inferior." Last time we said that could be people of a different race, uneducated people or *too* educated, older people or younger, and so on. But what about the *poor*? 35 million Americans are considered poor by the US government. They make less than \$9570 a year; or couples make less than \$12,830; and a family of four, less than \$19,350/year.

Keystone's pretty much a middle class church. The majority of us range from the lower middle to the upper middle income brackets, and that affects our attitudes about people on *both* sides of our financial flume; but especially those poorer than us.

But this morning it's not *our* attitudes towards the poor that I want to explore, but God's. Because when we discover what *His* attitude is towards the poor, then we'll know what *ours* should be. READ Jas.2:5-7.

Most who got this letter from James were relatively poor. Which baffled James, "Why do you fall all over yourself for rich people when they're the very kind of folks who exploit you, take you to court, and make fun of your Jesus." Understand that he's talking in general terms here, stereotypical terms, he's not saying that every rich person is an evil person or arrayed against God. It's just that to James' readers, most of the people mistreating them *were* rich: exploitation, legal thievery, and slander.

Exploitation may have been outrageously high rents, or poor wages (or unpaid-5:4). Summoned to court not to face criminal or civil charges, but to face legal maneuverings to acquire their property. The teachers of the law did that (Lk.20:47) with widows' real estate. *And*, of those who publicly maligned Jesus, most were society's uppercrust. (It's possible the folks James was thinking about were Jewish, Christ-haters like the Pharisees, etc.)

James wondered why Christians—poor themselves, would make such a fuss over people like that; why—for example—give the rich man the best pew and the poor man the floor? After all, the God that *James* served, and the God that his *readers* served, had *selected* the poor for special attention. REREAD Jas.2:5.

If that offends or irritates you, put it aside while we do a brief Bible study and try to draw some conclusions.

- Leviticus 23:22: Requires those better off to help supply the poor.
- Proverbs 19:17: The Lord identifies Himself **as** the poor.
- Acts 10:4: A man's gifts to the poor were noticed by God (helping the poor gets God's attention).
- Luke 4:18: God targeted the poor with the gospel.
- Luke 6:20: God reserved His Kingdom for the poor. (Not only, but especially)
- Mark 12:43-44: God's more impressed by a poor person's sacrificial gift than a rich man's large gift.
- Gal.2:10: Christians have a central obligation to the poor.

My first conclusion is that...

1. The poor (needy) are close to God's heart

- Luke 1:52-53
- Luke 12:13-21: Parable of the rich fool
- Luke 16:19-25: Rich man and Lazarus
- Luke 18:18-25: Rich ruler

My second conclusion is that...

2. The poor have a spiritual advantage.

Or perhaps I should say, “the *rich* have a spiritual *disadvantage*,” it is their wealth. *...he became very sad because he was a man of great wealth.* This young ruler couldn't turn it over to God; couldn't give it up. Can't I get salvation at a discount? I'd like all of Jesus, but He can only have part of me. And *that's* why Jesus said salvation is so hard for the rich man; he's not inclined to put everything on the altar.

There's the spiritual *advantage* of the poor. No other gods to worship; no Beamer, no portfolio, no mansion, no toy collection, no designer wardrobe. Abraham told the rich man suffering in hell, “You had it good on earth and Lazarus had it bad; now *he's* got it good and you have it bad.” What little the poor man has he can more easily part with than the *abundance* of the rich man. The poor man with little future here on earth is ecstatic that there is a great future awaiting him after death.

So you see, God *does* have a special place in his heart for the poor. If you're a social conservative like I am, this is a little confusing. Maybe you've developed a scab where a heart for the poor might have at one time been. You've seen too much. I have been asked for money by the poor—many times here at the office, as well as on vacation, in gas stations, at sidewalk cafes, and on the streets. The staff pastors who've been here a while can spot the lies, the fanciful stories that are told, and we wish some of the energy and creativity were used for employment instead.

We know about the 2nd, 3rd and even 4th generation poor; able bodied people with no place to go and no time to be there by, living off of our tax dollars. Politicians exploit the poor by promising them the moon if they're elected. We're not sure how we feel about America's poor when—unlike the destitute poor of the world, nearly ¾ own a car, and 1/3 have *two* cars.

- 46% own their own 3 BR home with a garage, porch and patio.
- 76% have AC; just 30 years ago, only 36% of the entire *population* had it.
- 97% have a color TV and more than 50%, a second TV.

So, in disgust, some of us write off the poor. After Hurricane Katrina, NEWSWEEK'S Jonathan Alter joined other voices blaming the government for institutionalized poverty in New Orleans. I agree, but unlike Alter, believe that a sizeable part of the problem is the very fact that THE GOVERNMENT'S INVOLVED. You see, in the early 1900's, it was the not the government, but individuals—especially Christian individuals who cared for the poor and needy: widows, orphans, the elderly homeless, the mentally disturbed, drunkards, drug addicts,. Because they *worshipped* God, the *people* of God had an *assignment* from God to *help* the needy. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength; you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Because they loved the Lord, they loved their neighbors. How many governmental social service professionals do you think *love* the people they serve? Certainly some, but others simply pity them, or simply do their job, or say it's the government duty. If

you love a person you will do what's in their best interests; but if that person is simply a project, an assignment, a job...

So, if God has a special place in his heart for the poor, and the poor are spiritually advantaged, how shall we then live?

- Give money:
 - Christians ministries/ NGO's that reflect your values (responsibility [2 Thess.3:11-12], love—and not just duty, tough love when needed, holistic help).
- Donate time:
 - Volunteer at Water Street, Deb's House, Tabor Housing.
 - Take someone into your home: teach them personal care if needed, help find work, prepare for job interviews, be prompt, handle money.
 - Teaching people to read; other kinds of tutoring

As a church, I dream of the day when we'll have—maybe in this building if we move elsewhere, here a rural mission: food pantry, clothing distribution, a residence for men complete job training, financial training, sharing Christ, mentoring them; a place which on a small scale what no governmental agency can do: show them Christian love complete with all it's kindness and all its toughness.

Concl

Duet.15:10-11: Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.