

Pastor Tom Mortenson

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

September 16, 2012

Partiality

James 2:1-9, Part 17

Prayer: *Before we begin, I just want to take a moment to pray for one of our sisters who is once again in the valley. That's Donna Tetter who is at Bon Secours, this time it's blood poisoning of some sort. As you well know, she has been in that valley over and over and over again, so I just want to lift her up. Father, I just -- I pray for Donna, I pray for a quick resolution to this again, this yet another medical event. I just know how this wears on her and how often she struggles with what have I done wrong. Father, I just, I pray for encouragement for her, I pray that she would have staff and people that would in some way bring her joy this morning, that you would give her the ability to understand that she is even yet being refined, and that you are there walking through that valley with her, and I pray this in Jesus' name. I also want to lift up this message this morning, Father, it's a new beginning, it's a new time. I just pray that you would open up our eyes and our ears and our heart to what James has to say to us. There is much here for us to learn from, but once again we acknowledge that your Holy Spirit is who makes this make sense. And so I pray this*

morning, Lord, as we open up your book anew, that you would guide us, that you would give us the grace to understand these truths and to make them a permanent part of our lives, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, as I said, this is the time of new beginnings, and we all know the summer has ended, unfortunately we're starting a new year, and it's a new year of learning. We're going to be celebrating some new beginnings, we have our baptism picnic this afternoon, and I just want to say if anybody at the last minute is feeling pressed on by the Holy Spirit to engage in baptism, by all means, this is the time. We're going to have a time of sharing when we're over at Spears' pavilion. If God is pressing you about that now, speak to me afterwards.

And again, something new, we're back to the book of James. I thought about doing a quick review of last year's series on James now that we've arrived at James Chapter 2, but then I realized I'm incapable of quick reviews. I did 16 messages on James when I had this nasty habit of doing reviews that last almost as long as the original material. And we have such wonderful new material we get to cover in James Chapter 2, I decided to ask if you have any interest, you can pursue any of the material in James chapter 1 on the website, you can access any message we did on any of the topics

that James brings up there.

So we're looking at James chapter 2. And in chapter 2, James makes a clean break with the thoughts that he ended in chapter 1 so we can start afresh. This is James 2, verses 1-9: *My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, 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? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*

Well, James wastes no time getting to the heart of an issue that at

first you would think this really doesn't make a lot of sense. James is obviously speaking about partiality, but he's speaking it to a group of people to whom it should be of no consequence, people who would be complete strangers to it, you would think. See, these are believers who have been the severe victims of the very same kind of treatment. If you remember going back to the opening of the letter, James in -- in James 1:1-3 says this. He says: *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the dispersion: Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.* James is writing to a group who's already been heavily tested by trials of various kinds. These believers were part of the dispersion. They had been dispersed and they had been scattered due to persecution. They had not only been rejected by the pagans who were surrounding them, they had been rejected by their fellow Jews for embracing this heretical notion that Jesus was actually the Christ, the Messiah. They had been ostracized, discriminated against, and persecuted. So they knew exactly what it felt like to be treated with the same partiality that they were now being accused of in treating others.

James' observation first points to a folly that is very prevalent in our culture today; that is, of seeing groups or classes solely as either victims or victimizers. Make no mistake about it. There

are victims and there are victimizers, but the roles are almost completely interchangeable, depending on which group has the power at which time.

Now let me give you an example. You know, unions, unions traditionally came about because management took unfair advantage of disorganized labor. Without some kind of unified base, unscrupulous bosses found it remarkably easy to force factory workers into low wages, long hours, and appalling work conditions. So in the earliest part of the 20th century, it became standard practice to route for the factory worker because he was the traditional underdog. That is until workers began to become organized, until they became organized and efficient and politically connected. And very soon we found out that it was organized labor that was telling management that they had no choice but to pay extravagant wages and benefits or risk having their plants and factories shut down.

Today, public service unions typically threaten to -- quote -- "shut this city down" if their salary demands are not met. We just saw that last week in Chicago in the teachers' union. See, there's really nothing at all remarkable about these different turns of events other than to say that power corrupts. We are, all of us, sinners, and given the opportunity to exercise our sin nature, we

will prove that we are no different than any other group. There is no such thing as an inherently righteous group, and that certainly includes the local church. James makes that abundantly self-evident when he addresses the church that had experienced intense partiality about the partiality that they're now extending to others. Again, he says in James 2: *My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in the good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

James is pointing to an obvious case of partiality that seems -- it's almost cartoonish. It's as if he's exaggerating to make a point. He's describing this dapper fellow in an Armani suit with a Rolex watch, and he's comparing him to someone with an ill-fitted suit that obviously came from the Salvation Army, and the dapper fellow gets treated like a prince, and the Salvation Army guy gets treated like pond scum.

James is making a number of important points here. The first has

to do with how we treat people of wealth. But I would be very careful, very careful in the way that we define that wealth. You see, I would describe our church as a middle class, blue-collar kind of a place, and frankly, if somebody showed up here with an Armani suit and a Rolex watch, we wouldn't know what to do with him. He would feel incredibly out of place. This is not a place where an ostentatious display of wealth is going to get you anywhere. In fact, I think it would have the opposite effect. But that doesn't mean by any stretch of the imagination that James' words do not apply to us. We just have a different way of assessing wealth, and I refer to it as "social capital." You see, there are some people by virtue of looks, personality, or giftedness that are just naturally attractive, and there are other people who are less so. If you have a lot of social capital, then you qualify as wealthy in the sense that James is speaking of here. You are the one to whom folks say, "You sit here in a good place," and people love to chat you up, they want to get to know you, they want to invite you to dinner, they want to welcome you into the church. But there are other people who have less of this social capital. They may not fit the mold as successful evangelicals. They may have social problems, financial problems, physical problems, sin problems, they are the ones that James refers to as getting the "You stand over there," or "Sit down at my feet" treatment. To say that God takes a dim view of that attitude

would be an understatement. James says: *Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

Now, the reason why God's response to partiality in the church is swift and it is strong is because Christians are the very last people on earth to be making those kind of judgments. Jesus once told a story. He told a story to Peter when Peter had asked Jesus how often he had to forgive. This is the story, it's in Matthew 18:23. It goes like this, it says: *"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settling accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents." Just to reiterate, this is a multiple, multiple millions of dollars worth of debt, unpayable. "When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'" Virtually impossible. "And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him saying, 'Pay you what owe.'" So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded*

with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Now, Jesus was not addressing partiality per se when he told this story to Peter, but the debt principle that he lays out applies just as well. See, Jesus sought to make it unmistakable that God sees all of us as thoroughly and completely morally bankrupt and in no position whatsoever to demand anything or to hold anything over anyone. Moreover, the very nature of God abhors partiality.

In 2 Chronicles 19:7, God says: *Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes.* In Psalm 82 he says: *"How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah. Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;*

maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute."

So why is God so exercised against partiality? Well, as I said, morally speaking, God sees us literally as "tapped out" and utterly without a leg to stand on, because God sees every one of us as the debt-ridden servant that Jesus was speaking about. Morally speaking, we are all beggars, beggars that He loved, beggars that he died for, beggars that he has made into co-heirs with Christ but beggars, nonetheless. And Peter, as a debt-ridden beggar, was in no position to withhold forgiveness, and the church that James is writing to is also in no position to practice any form whatsoever of one upmanship.

Partiality attempts to ignore our status as beggars in order to pretend that there are different levels of quality. And James is going after the notion that some of those in the church happen to think that they just might be at this higher quality level. James says: *Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

And you know, there's another point that James is making here. The point is the role that individuals in leadership have in the collective responsibility of the entire church. You see, James' story, it casts the blame on an entire congregation for the actions

of what was probably either a Deacon maybe, even an usher, somebody. He says: Have you then not made distinctions among yourselves, plural? James doesn't single out individuals. Instead, he castigates the entire congregation. What he is addressing really, it is not a matter of fairness. It is a matter of fact. And the fact is, you and I, we are the church. 1 Corinthians 12:12 says this: *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.* I can't tell you how many times I have personally spoken to people whose impressions of the entire church were shaped and formed by contacts with one or two people. I've heard people remark that this is a "cold church," this is a "warm church," this is a "caring church," this is an "uncaring church," and in each case, the impression that person got was made by an impression gotten from one or two people.

And James, either through observation or report, discerns that his congregation has been making distinctions between the wealthy, who they fall over, and the poor, who they disdain. And his observation goes beyond the partiality that he sees to a distinction that he knows already exists in God's economy. He says

in James 2:5: *Listen, my beloved brothers, 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?*

Well, now you might be thinking, wait a minute. Isn't God guilty of the very same thing that James is castigating his congregation for? Isn't God exhibiting partiality here towards a certain group of people? In this case, God clearly appears to be partial towards the poor. *Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?*

So how do you explain God's seeming partiality towards the poor? Well, the simple answer is: God's got rights that we don't have. He's got that right, because he's not the beggar. He's the debt payer, and that gives him certain rights we don't have. And he says in Romans 9:18: *So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.* I've said this before, poverty in and of itself is not a measure of a person's fitness for heaven, but it can certainly be a measure of that person's blessedness, and that is God's sovereign choice, his right, his ability to make that.

And when James says in James 1:9: *Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation,* he's giving us a basic lesson in the economics of

heaven. You see, like so many other aspects of the kingdom of God, it is diametrically opposed to the kingdom of earth. Jesus has told us in this economy in the kingdom in Matthew 19:30, he says: *"The first will be last, and the last will be first."* In Matthew 23, he says: *"The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."* In John 12:25, he says: *"Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."*

So we get this notion, you see, the kingdom of God is really the kingdom of earth stood on its head. And what is big on earth is little in the kingdom. So would it not follow that Jesus would identify riches and poverty in the same diametrically opposite way? I mean, we all know the American dream, it consists of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the pursuit of happiness in this world inevitably means pursuing material wealth. Not only did Jesus say that is not the case with the kingdom of heaven, he goes much, much further than that. He says the exact opposite is the case. Jesus wasn't exaggerating when he said in Luke 18: *"For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."* He also said in Luke 6:20: *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."* You notice Jesus is not saying poor "in spirit" here. He

simply says: *"Blessed are you who are poor."* Now, is Jesus describing a level of goodness to poverty itself or is he simply stating a fact? The fact is this: Material wealth, more often than not, makes it much more difficult to even see the kingdom of God let alone to desire and choose it. Remember back when Jesus confronted the rich young ruler, he said this in Matthew 19, he said: *"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."* When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

More often than not, the wealth that you have has you. And the more wealth you have, the more wealth has you. And those who have never tasted material wealth, that is, the poor, are far more likely to avoid developing a taste for it than those who are unknowingly already addicted to it. There's a reason why James says in James 2:5: *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?*

You know, I saw that reason firsthand when we went to India. I've mentioned this many times before, but it bears repeating. When we went to India, we were exposed to people living in poverty unlike anything I had ever even imagined in America. I said we first

arrived in Chennai, we stayed at this hotel, a nice hotel, and there was a big construction project going on on 8th floor, and there was a lot of concrete rubble that had to be removed, and there was a whole group of laborers clad only in loin cloth, barefoot, with great big lids on their head, and they were running -- literally running barefoot up eight flights of stairs, they wouldn't dare allow them use the elevators, running eight flights of stairs then back down these flights of stairs just to dump this concrete rubble that they were working on. And I inquired, found out that they were doing this, they worked the entire day, eight to ten hours, they would do that for between 80 cents and a dollar and a quarter. And these people who were working were fathers who were trying to feed their families on a dollar a day. You know, and I thought about just -- you know, recently Janice is back doing the bread ministry, and she distributes excess bread and excess pastries that Price Chopper is going to throw away. And on Wednesday nights she leaves the excess of the excess on a bunch of tables downstairs, and it's a blessing to many. Folks take them home to eat, some folks take them home to feed their chickens. And that's okay. It's just part of the blessing that we have. I have no doubt though that my friends in India, if they saw that, they would be overwhelmed. They would be blown away. I mean, it's no exaggeration to say that the contents of our garbage cans on average would be considered a phenomenal

blessing to them. These are the folks that took us in, these are the folks that welcomed us. And I said this many, many times before, while I was there, all the time I was there, I was just afraid that somehow they would find out how fabulously wealthy I was. They didn't know that. They didn't make any assumptions at all. You know, like I said, I owned my own house. These folks lived communally in shacks and huts made out of tin and cardboard and scraps of wood. I own three cars. You know, all of them together don't equal the price of one new car but still, I own three cars. They worked their entire lives to be able to afford a used bicycle. I have health insurance and guaranteed medical care. If they get sick, they either get well on their own or they just die and nobody really makes a big deal out of it.

I've mentioned before, one of the little boys that we had become very attached to, we were trying to see if there was something we could work out because he had something wrong with his foot. And in the interim, Pastor Papaf told us unfortunately he died, and he died of something that we would never even think of. He died of rabies. That's something that we don't even think of, because they frequently die of diseases and ailments that have long been eradicated in our country. And I'm painting a very, very bleak picture, but here's what I found that was absolutely astounding. Here's where the poor in the world are rich in faith, because in

spite of the poverty, in spite of the back breaking labor, in spite of the disease, these folks by and large seem to have more joy, more satisfaction, more delight at simply being alive than any dozen people I know from here, the richest country on earth.

You know, we went around to dozens and dozens of these tiny little churches, and we just marvel at how hungry these people were, not for food, but for the word of God. You know, we would set up the loud speakers and just start playing hymns and people would just begin drifting into the local spot where people got together. They just knew that there were people going to meet to worship, and they would be drifting in, obvious that they were coming to pray. And they would be bringing their bibles and they were there to worship and to learn more about their Lord and their Savior Jesus Christ, and the intensity with which they listened, it was like every single word they were hanging on to, and if you made a reference to scripture, they would be whipping through their bibles trying to find it. So it was unusual, I mean, these folks hung on every single word. And even now, even now, they will spend the entire night in prayer for us. I could -- I could type a message to Pastor Papaf: We need prayer. "We'll spend the night in prayer for Grace Fellowship in Port Jervis." Not a problem.

You see, I think it really has very little to do with the fact that

they are in India and everything to do with the fact that these people have nothing, absolutely nothing of the material world. They're just the lowly. They're the lowly that James is speaking of in James 1:9 where he says: *Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation.* See, they had all of the Spirit that God loves to give and none of the stuff that the world loves to give. My guess is if we had gone to set up public worship in some of the more westernized parts of India, to places like Bangalore or Chennai where the people are more westernized, they're more secular, they're more wealthy, they're not lowly there, they would have looked at us like we had had two heads. That's what wealth can do. No matter where you are in the world, it is a fact that wealth to a large extent takes away from us a sense of need and urgency and dependency that brings us often times unwillingly to the kingdom of God. These folks clung to God like their lives depended on it, because they did.

So I ask myself a very simple question. How often has prosperity and good times driven me to my knees? How often have trials and struggles? What happens to our prayer lives when we face seriously sick kids, seriously unpaid bills, or serious unemployment? You see why James is saying in James 2:5: *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?* James is

acknowledging nothing more than the simple fact that, by and large, the lowly are far more blessed with this opportunity than are the rich. And poverty can be God's idea of blessing. It fits perfectly into his upside down economy. 1 Corinthians 1:27 says: *But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*

See James now, afterwards he just starts to snap this discussion back to the reality that he's addressing at first. We go back to James 2:6-7, and this is what he says. He says: *But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? You see, if you remember that God's economy is exactly the opposite of the world's, then you can see that in fact it is the poor man who's being honored by God.*

James points to another fact that often eludes those who love to show partiality to the rich. I call it the "toady" factor. You know what a "toady" is? You all know what a "toady" is? A toady is a sycophant who likes to line up with the -- on the side of the

bully. They're the kind that would be nodding in approval as the shabby man is being told "You stand over there," or "You sit at my feet." God says in verse 4: *Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

See, bullies don't often operate solo. They like to have a couple of toadies that hang around them. And they hang around not because they like it but because they perceive it's better to be on his good side than not. And Jesus is addressing the very attitude that this partiality is -- James is addressing the very attitude that this partiality is based on, the attitude that thinks it's far better to be hanging with the swells than hanging with the losers, better to kowtow to the rich guy in the Armani suit than extend yourself to someone who offers little and nothing in return.

This is what Jesus said in Luke 14, he said: *"When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."* See, God is addressing two very distinct groups here through James. And to those with the Armani suits and the gold watches, the ones who bask in social acceptance,

who get sought after, who get attention paid to, who get opinions asked of, God says you, you more than any other group of people are less fortunate than you think, because all of this capital that you have is blinding, it is stupefying, and it is temporary.

James 1:11 says: *For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.* God has far more to say particularly to those wealthy who have no sense of the dangers of wealth. None of it is good, and much of it is, frankly, terrifying. In James 5:1 he says: *Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.* Now, when you read this, you might get the impression that God just has a problem with wealth. Perhaps God's part of the occupy movement, just hates those -- those one percenters. God sees wealth as inherently evil. Well, God's word says no, it doesn't. At the end of Job's life, God said this in Job 42:12, he says: *And the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning. And he had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys.* In other words, God gave Job an enormous fortune. Was that evil?

In the New Testament in Acts 16:14 it says this about the gospel, it says: *One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city*

of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened up her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. Now, a seller of purple is like saying a seller of thoroughbreds or Picassos or Porches. It meant she was extremely wealthy. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was being said by Paul.

When Jesus' body was being taken down from the cross, virtually everyone had scattered in terror. There were only two parties that even had a hint of loyalty who stayed and remained and took some risks, who had the courage to seek after his body. One of them was the group of the women, the other was a man named Joseph who scripture describes this way in Matthew 27. It says: *When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. That was an incredible risk. But the courage of that act of love got Joseph, a rich man according to scripture, a permanent place in scripture. So I think we can make the case that God doesn't consider wealth to be inherently evil.*

But we can also make the case that God considers wealth to be radioactively dangerous, and not nearly the blessing we all assume that it is. James knows wealth is highly problematic, and this

congregation is already feeling the repercussions of it as James sees it dividing the church. So his words to the man in the Armani suit is simple, it's Luke 12:48, he says: *From everyone who has given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*

But you know, God also has a word to the man in the shabby clothes. He's got a word for the one who lacks either the real capital or the social capital that this culture demands. To the ones who felt left out, passed over, joked about, mocked, or just plain ignored, to those who have grown cynical about the possibility that God in heaven would actually love them, God says this in James 2:5: *Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?*

I can say on the authority of God's word that you and I simply lack the mental and spiritual capacity to even begin to grasp the extent of the love that God has for you. God says in 1 Corinthians 2:9: *But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love him."* In 1 John 4:9, it says: *In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only son into the*

world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Well, if you lack the social capital that so many do, you may be thinking, well, that's -- that's for others, that's not really for me. But I would ask you: How is it that you're even here in this place to hear my words in the first place? I would also ask: How is it that even -- that your spirit even considers the possibility of the truth of these words? Ask yourself, is it all just a simple coincidence, or is it not perhaps the Spirit of God speaking into your spirit? If you have little or no social capital, understand that in Christ you have been made wealthy beyond your wildest imagination. You are a co-heir with Christ of the entire universe. God himself has taken up residence within you and has set your life to the task of recreating the very image of His Son in you. The man with the shabby clothes and the shabby life needs to realize that James 2:5 says: *God has 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.*

Jesus wants to show you how to die to yourself. And he wants to show you how to die to yourself because you're willing to trust him when he says in John 12:25: *Whoever loves his life loses it, and*

whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Here's the simple fact. The shabby clothes life is a lot easier to hate, it's a lot easier to give up than is the gold watches and the Armani suits. And that's how God's upside down economy works.

See, I believe God intently watches our interaction with folks who have little or no social capital. I believe he watches us as individuals and as a church because that's where our true hearts get revealed. That's where James' congregation was failing. James 2:6, he said: *But you dishonored the poor man.* He goes on to say: *Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?* James is saying, come on, it's not the poor who are mounting these sophisticated legal maneuvers against their fellow poor, it's the rich who are hauling you into court. And yet you defer to them. That's what toadies to.

James goes on to say in James 2:8: *If you really fulfill the royal law according to Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*

Now, you know, I might be -- I might be sadly mistaken, but I think that we, as a church, do pretty well in this area. I've told most of the people who come into leadership here that we are interested in how they respond not so much to the swells, not so much to folks whose looks and personality and circumstance makes them already attractive, but to those who come to Grace with some obvious measure of brokenness. You know, I tell everyone who comes to Grace that everyone in this building is broken. Everyone. They're just broken in different ways. But every one of us is being shaped and molded into the very image of the son of God. Every one of us who is part of his kingdom is in the process of becoming more and more attractive in every way because Jesus was the loveliest person who ever walked the earth. And he's reproducing in us his love, his joy, his peace, his patience, his kindness, his gentleness, his meekness, his faithfulness, and his self-control. That's the fruit of his Holy Spirit that is dangling from the branches of our lives. Partiality is a disease that may not kill the vine outright, but it so robs it of its vitality that that fruit becomes gnarled and insipid. If the very recipients of God's grand gift ever start to lose sight of their status as gloriously redeemed beggars, they cease to represent the grace that brought them here, and partiality becomes second nature. That's what James is after here. Each of us should be astounded that we've won the greatest lottery humankind will ever know. God himself became the man

Christ Jesus. He lived out his life flawlessly, then he offered it up to his Father's justice as payment in full for your sin and my sin. And for reasons known to God alone, he has chosen to pluck us -- us as brands from the fire, to set us on the solid ground of his word and to redeem our lives.

1 Peter 2 says: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Partiality? 'My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.'* Let's pray.

Prayer: *Father God, I do thank you for the book of James, I thank you for the immense -- the immense practicality of it, how he just gets to the heart of the matter and how we see the church of 2,000 years ago was no different from the church of today, the church in Port Jervis was no different from the church in the Middle East, because people are people and sinners are sinners and beggars are beggars. We are beggars, Lord, but we are gloriously redeemed beggars. Give us the ability to understand that, give us the ability to project that, and give us the ability to invite other*

*beggars to participate in the banquet that we have. I pray this in
Jesus' name. Amen.*