

**SNOBBERY IN THE CHURCH**  
**JAMES 2:1-13**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Some passages in scripture provoke memories for me. This passage is definitely one of them. While I was pastor of the North Fort Worth Baptist Church, I did a series of expositions from the book of James. During that series and on the Sunday before I was to preach from this text, we had a fine young black man to present himself for membership in the church. Since he was the first black person to be received by our church, it created some stir among the fellowship.

On the Sunday morning that I was to preach from this text, John Ballard, who was our Minister of Music, had enrolled this young man in the choir. Not only had he joined the church on one Sunday, on the next Sunday when the choir came in to lead us in worship, he was prominently present in the choir. When the choir took their place in the choir loft and began to lead us in worship, some of our members were greatly distressed by the presence of this young black man in the choir. In fact, one dear lady became so agitated that she left the worship service and was standing in the hall listening. Our chief usher saw her standing in the hall and thought she was ill so he went to her to offer help. She indicated to him that she was not sick. He asked her, "Then what is the problem? Is there

something that I can do to help?" She blurted out to him, "There is no way I can worship God sitting in that congregation with that black face in the choir!"

This text was a completely appropriate text for a moment like that in the life of the church. What the woman was expressing was snobbery, favoritism. She was judging this man to be unworthy of having a place in our worship of God. Webster defines a snob as, "One who by his conduct makes evident that he sets excessive store by rank, wealth, social eminence, to the detriment of merit." This dear lady, who had stalked out of the worship service, had passed judgment upon the young man who was singing in the choir totally on the basis of the color of his skin. Her only consideration was his race. It was pure favoritism.

James sets forth his concern in the first verse, "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism." Then he sets forth a first century example of favoritism, or snobbery, and some reasons why it must not have a place among those who profess to believe in the Lord Jesus.

James describes what was probably a well-known incident that had taken place in a New Testament church in his day. It was the church usher who had been a snob. When he had opportunity to welcome a man who displayed considerable wealth, he gave him favored treatment. He made sure that the man of considerable wealth received a very comfortable and prominent seat in the assembly. When a man dressed in shabby clothes came in, he received no preference. In fact, he was handled rather rudely and received the suggestion that he find himself a place to sit on the floor. Ever the practical man that he is, James

addresses this problem head on. In the process of doing this he brings before us four important considerations when there is snobbery or favoritism being practiced in the assembly.

### **I. SNOBBERY REFLECTS CORRUPT JUDGMENT.**

The usher who seated the two men in the assembly assumed the role of a judge. He judged the wealthy man to be deserving of special recognition. He judged the man dressed in shabby clothes of being not worthy of any consideration. James warns that this is an erroneous act on the part of the usher. He is acting as a snob.

#### 1. Judgment is God's prerogative.

In his confrontation of the action of the usher, James says, "Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" Any time we usurp the place of the judge, we are usurping a place that belong to God alone. God is the only one who has insight enough and wisdom enough to decide who is worthy of special recognition and honor in the assembly. It may well be that we are guilty of a severe injustice if we receive one with special recognition and humiliate another. Who knows, we may be humiliating the wrong person.

#### 2. Judgment based on outward things is corrupt.

This is the force of what James is saying when he levels the charge of discriminating among yourselves and becoming judges with evil thoughts. The New English Bible translates it; "Do you not see that you are inconsistent and judged by false standards?"

The usher made a quick judgment and based it entirely on outward appearance. The man he choose to honor had outward signs of wealth while the man he choose not to honor had outward signs of poverty. Based on these outward things, he made a difference between the two men. This is using a false standard. God's judgments are based on what He knows to be the heart of the person, on the truth about the character of the person.

So it is in the contemporary church. If we base our judgment on the way a person is dressed, the part of town they live in, the color of their skin, the amount of education that they have acquired, or the position that they hold in the community, we, too, are guilty of using a false standard. When we come into the house of God to worship, it is not our role to play judge about who is the best or the most worthy. We must leave such judgment in to the hands of the all-wise God who is the judge of us all.

## **II. SNOBBERY IGNORES GRACE.**

Whatever else is true of the Christian assembly, it is a fellowship of grace. It is the safe assumption that every person present has been made the object of God's unmerited favor, His generous grace. When it comes to standing together in worship, we stand on very level ground.

1. Grace makes salvation available to all regardless of their worldly standing.

James refers to this in his next statement when he says, "Listen, my dear brothers: 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 those who love Him?" It is a matter of history that it has been

the poor who have been most responsive to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is the rich who have been most resistant to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not the poor who have persecuted others for their faith; rather it has been the elite of society.

James uses the word "chosen." This reminds us that Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church about those that God calls to salvation. In that great passage to Corinthians he said, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. No many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth, but God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus who has become for us wisdom from God — that is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: let him who boast, boast in the Lord" (I Cor. 1:26-31).

The snobbish usher in that first century church was ignoring the activity of grace. It may well have been that the man he allowed to sit on the floor was the one that God had chosen to display His grace toward in a special way. We need to keep this in mind. We dare not violate the principle of grace that makes salvation available to all regardless of their station in life.

2. Grace exalts the lowly.

James had in mind some of the words spoken by his elder brother, our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord had said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In a parallel statement in Luke's Gospel He said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." On more than one occasion, he spoke such words concerning people dressed in shabby clothes. He choose to make heroes in a number of settings those who came from different national and racial backgrounds. He held up a Samaritan as a hero in one story. He offered salvation to a Samaritan woman, of all people, from Sychar. Yet, this snobbish usher in the First Baptist Church in Jerusalem was guilty of seeking to humiliate one who had a humble status in life. While God Himself is pleased to exalt such humble ones and to give them all the privileges of the kingdom of heaven. There is no place in the church for favoritism or snobbery — not if we preach grace!

### **III. SNOBBERY BREAKS THE ROYAL LAW.**

James calls attention to the royal law and how this act of this snobbish usher violates that royal law. He says, "If you really keep the royal law found scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself, ' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers." This indicates the seriousness of a church practicing institutional favoritism and snobbery.

1. The royal law is the law of love.

Scholars have debated why James calls this particular commandment the royal commandment. Some have thought it was because Jesus gave such emphasis to this commandment. And He did on a number of occasions. Others have thought that it is the

royal commandment because it has kingly rule over all of the other commandments and this may well be true. The New English Bible translates it the "sovereign" law. There is no greater principal of the kingdom of God than this principle of love that calls on us to love others as we love ourselves. So, we need to understand that the royal law is the commandment to love others as we love ourselves.

## 2. Snobbery is a failure to love.

Actually, James goes ever further and makes it sound even more serious. He says, "But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers." A little reflection will make it easy to understand why snobbery is an unloving act. It is particularly an unloving act toward those who are ignored or excluded. If that usher had been poor and dressed in shabby clothes and had made his appearance at the assembly on this Sabbath morning, how would he have wanted to be treated? How would he have felt if the usher had refused to seat him on a regular pew and had instead invited him to find a seat on the floor somewhere? You do not have to be exceptionally brilliant or sympathetic to figure that out. He would obviously have felt humiliated, and he would have felt cheapened by the treatment that he had received. He would not have felt loved. He would not have felt that he had been treated as a person of worth.

We have to be careful at this point. We need to make sure that we treat others who come in to this assembly like we would want to be treated if we were guests in this assembly. In the years that we did denominational work together, Alice and I had opportunities to see how people treated strangers in this midst. She would often be seated by herself

somewhere in the congregation, and no one would know that she was the wife of the preacher for the day. On numerous occasions, not one person around her would seek to make her welcome to the house of God. On at least one occasion, she was asked to move because she was seated in some little lady's favorite seat. She was not made to feel loved, or welcomed in the house of her heavenly Father. Now, usually though if they found out she was the wife of the Executive Director of the state convention, then the treatment improved. There would be people who came around and wanted to get acquainted with her. Their whole attitude was changed when they found out that she might be somebody! The truth is she was somebody in the eyes of the Lord whether the church knew it or not. And the church, the members of the church, we are guilty of violating the commandment of love.

3. The law is a unit — when you break one rule, you break all of them.

This is the most devastating thing that James says in this whole passage. He sets forth a principle that we need to keep before us always. He explains, "For who ever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it for he who said, 'Do not commit adultery' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker." So, if I practice snobbery in the church I am guilty of breaking the whole law.

Is this not an indicting concept? Here I come into the house of God proud of the way I have kept the law—I have not stolen anything, murdered anyone, committed adultery, worshipped any idol. Yet, when I come into the house of God, I receive one man based

on his evident outward prosperity, and I intentionally ignore another man because he is dressed in shabby clothes, I have become a lawbreaker. Or I welcome one person because he is of my race, but I ignore another because his skin is of a different color, I have broken the royal law. I am guilty of breaking the whole law! What a serious indictment!

I think in the consideration of this royal law, we need to consider why a person would act as a snob and be unloving. Why did this usher make such an obvious blunder? Could it be because he looked upon the two men and made a judgment about which would mean the most to their assembly if he became a regular worshipper in the assembly? He decided, based totally on outward appearance that the wealthy man was more likely to make a lasting contribution to the assembly than was the shabbily dressed poor man. None of us are qualified to make such a judgment. Or could it be that the usher was simply reflecting the prejudices of the community? Only God knows what He has planned to do with a human life — and you will not be able to determine it on the bases of outward appearance. We are to give to everyone who comes the most gracious and loving welcome possible.

#### **IV. SNOBBERY DENIES MERCY.**

This is the final word that James gives to us in this confrontation with the snobbish usher. He admonishes us: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"

1. We will all be judged.

James is admonishing us to look at our lives in light of the fact that we are headed for a day of accountability before God. We will be judged concerning how we have treated others. This principle is one on which you can build your life—I will be judged by a sovereign and impartial judge. In that day, God will show no favoritism. The principles to be used in the judgment are revealed to us in the law of liberty—even the principles that are found in the Holy Bible.

2. We will need mercy in the Day of Judgment.

I don't think any of us will be prepared to debate James at this point. Every time I consider the possibility of standing before God in judgment, I am made to be grateful that He is a God of mercy. He is a God of mercy. He is one who does not reward us according to our iniquities, but according to His mercies. Can you agree with me at this point? Can you agree that when we stand before God we will all need mercy?

3. The merciful will receive mercy in the Day of Judgment.

James is simply reflecting what Jesus said in the beatitudes. Our Lord said, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy." And this is what James is setting forth in this great statement here. If we judge others without mercy, then when we stand before God, He will judge us without mercy.

Did that snobbish usher have mercy in his heart? Was he showing compassion toward the poor man? Obviously not! He was judging the man as being unworthy of any kind of prominent place in the assembly.

Suppose God treats us like we treat those who come in off the street into this place? What will it be like in the Day of Judgment? We need to make sure that this assembly is one where the fellowship of love is practiced. Our reception of people must not be based on any thing that can be measured outwardly. We must see men and women as persons of worth before God regardless of their social, economic, racial, or moral background. We must extend to them the same mercy that we want to receive when we stand in the presence of the Lord.

I must acknowledge that this congregation has made tremendous progress in this realm over the last 20 years that I have been associated with you. But, I must confess that we are not there yet. It is still possible for the poor persons of other races, people from other nations, and people who are different from us in some way, to come into this fellowship and not receive the open embrace of love and welcome that they ought to receive. Our comfort zone is still not big enough to include a welcome for every one that God brings to this fellowship. We ought to assume that when a man or woman walks into this fellowship that they are here under providential direction. We ought to receive them as though God Himself had directed them here. As we do, God will use this fellowship to bring healing to their lives. He would use this fellowship to brace men up in the storms of life and make them strong for whatever life may bring.

Let us rid the fellowship of all snobbery! Of all favoritism! Of all distinctions that are based on outward appearances! Let us do it for the glory of the Lord of glory, in whom we trust.