

## The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost James 2:1-10, 14-18

*My brethren, writes James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.*

And then he gives an example of partiality: treating the wealthy visitor to the congregation as a guest of honour and the poor as a problem. This example is, of course, obviously offensive. When we hear stories about such behaviour in a church, our initial reaction is usually one of indignation; although, of course, an even more healthy reaction would be to give room for the possibility that there might be more to the story, things we do not know about, or things the person claiming it as his or her personal experience might not know about. After all, our Catechism teaches us that one way not to give *false testimony against your neighbour* is to *explain everything in the kindest way*, which would, among other things, be to assume that people have the best of reasons for behaving the strange way they do. It also means, of course, that we should not assume, either, that the person telling us about it is necessarily *lying*. It means to keep an open mind in terms of assuming the best about everybody; this is but one aspect of Christian love. At any rate, when we hear about such favouring of the rich and disregard for the poor, we are pretty much all on board with it, that this is a bad thing. We all know that we should be good to the poor; Holy Scripture is full of statements to that effect.

In real life, though, and in the real life of a congregation, things might be quite different. For in real life, we have a budget to think about; well, we might not have a budget, but we do have *expenses*. In real life, we cannot afford to offend those who could contribute much to the congregation by not giving *them* a pass when it comes to being held accountable to the Word and will of God, can we, or their children or grandchildren. I have actually heard people say that; in fact, I think most Pastors have. Well, from what we hear today, we learn that this is wrong. But then, we should know already from the faith itself, should we not, that God is God, and that His Word and will apply to everybody, rich and poor alike, as well as to particularly valued members of the congregation, and even to *your* friends, and *your* family.

But actually, what we hear today is really not about wealth and poverty. *My brethren, writes James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, as we hear it, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.*

In other words, what James has in mind with what he writes is the faith itself.

To treat those as more valuable who have particularly much to contribute to the congregation, and even to think of them as such, it is not only to *show partiality*; it is to hold *the faith with partiality*, and to hold it only *partially*. It is to forget that our Lord Jesus is Himself *Head of the Church, His body, and her Saviour*, who *cherishes and nourishes* her, as He has had His holy Apostle Paul write it, and that as such, the Church should submit to Him and allow Him to be that which He already is, by the very nature of things.

It is about the faith itself James writes, also, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ: *Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs to the Kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?*

If God is partial at all, He is partial to the poor. Although, actually, He is not even that, not in all regards. *You shall do no injustice in judgement*, He says in the Law. *You shall neither be partial to the poor nor honour the person of the mighty; in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour.*

The Kingdom of God is not a matter of social justice, and certainly not as the concept *social justice* is usually understood these days, dividing people into classes to be favoured or despised, respectively, based on financial status or social standing or ethnicity or origin. The Kingdom of God is His Kingdom of salvation for sinners, all sinners. And again, God is God, and His Word and will apply to everybody alike, rich and poor, even to particularly valued members of the congregation, and your old friends, and members of your family.

And actually, when the Old Testament talks about *the poor*, it usually refers to those who acknowledge their poverty before God, their helplessness, and need for mercy; *the poor in spirit*, as our Lord Jesus says it; to them God is partial.

Nevertheless, this truth remains: that it is shameful for Christians to favour the rich and disregard the poor. James does teach this with what we hear today. But he has more in mind, so much more. He uses this observation of the obvious to remind his readers of our own standing with God, and the glorious salvation He promises to all who seek Him. *Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs to the Kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonoured the poor man!*

And obviously, to treat the poor with contempt is not right for those to whom all things good and glorious are given freely and for nothing, out of the goodness and grace of God, and for no other reason whatsoever.

Still, the real point is this: to hold the faith with partiality is to hold the faith only *partially*. And that will not do. We see this, as James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, employs another example of how the poor should not be treated.

*If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, he writes, as we hear it, and one of you says to them: "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what good is that?*

At first, we might hear this as yet another instruction as to how we should treat the poor. But again, James has something else in mind, something much more important: the faith itself.

*What good is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?, he writes, before he continues: If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them: "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what good is that? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say: "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. James is teaching the faith!*

This is, in fact, the central theme of the Letter of James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ: that true faith is a *living* thing; it cannot be without works, without love. As useless as a well-wisher who *does* no good is faith that does nothing in real life; in fact, a such faith is not faith at all.

A person who is not directed by the Word and will of God as to how he or she lives and behaves, and has no concerns about living in direct disobedience and disregard toward the Word of God, a such person is *not* a Christian; he or she is not of the faith!

For the faith is not merely an opinion, not even merely a *belief* as to how reality is put together. It is not what we *think*. Rather, the faith is the love of God alive and at work in us, by His living Word of love; that Word to which James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, refers elsewhere as *the Word which is able to save your souls*.

That Word is His Word of salvation, what His love has done for our salvation; that the Son of God, Judge of the living and the dead, has Himself borne all judgement for us. The Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity, had Himself born into our kind, and baptised into us, and into our sin, to take it upon Himself, and bear it for us, and His own judgement against it.

With His suffering and death upon a cross, under the curse of God, He has made us right with God, and righteous before His judgement; He has paid for us the price and penalty for the sin of all sinners, for all evil and ungodliness and impurity in our lives, and in our hearts and minds.

And with the Word He has His Church proclaim, He who shall judge the living and the dead declares us to be righteous and right before His judgement, only because He Himself has borne all judgement for us.

Therefore, His Word of salvation is not only the Word *about* His salvation; it really is *the Word which is able to save your souls*, as James writes it.

Therefore, and because with His Word of His love and what His love has done for us, He breathes His love into us, and His own life, with His Holy Spirit, who is the life of God, and His love, His very innermost self. And His love in us, and His life, makes us to come alive from the death of disobedience and defiance, and to believe in Him, and begin to love Him, so that we belong to Him and shall live and be with Him forever in His Kingdom.

As useless as a well-wisher who does no good, so useless is faith that has no life in it; and equally useless would the Word of God be, would it *demand* righteousness of us sinners, and not give it. And equally useless is any and all preaching that leaves sinners to our own devices. But the Word of God, is *not* a such word. It is not a mere command to live in a certain way, or even to *believe* in a certain way; it is the heavenly Judge declaring us to be His own, and making us to be that, by His judgement and declaration, and by breathing His own life into us, and His love, with His living Word of love.

The love of God is not *partial*; with His Word of salvation, His salvation is given to us fully and for real, so that our sins are forgiven, fully and for real, and we shall not perish and die forever in His judgement, but rather live and be with Him in His Kingdom, in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.

This is what James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, will teach us: not merely how we should live and behave, and not even that first and foremost; rather, he calls us, as he writes it elsewhere, to *receive that Word, which is able to save your souls*.

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. *Amen*.