

James 2:19, 14-17 (The Living Bible, adapted)

Dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim that you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, if you show favoritism to rich people and look down on poor people?

If a person comes into your church dressed in expensive clothes and with valuable gold rings on his fingers, and at the same moment another person comes in who is poor and dressed in threadbare clothes, and you make a lot of fuss over the rich one and give him the best seat in the house and say to the poor one, "You can stand over there if you like or else sit on the floor" well, judging a person by wealth shows that you are guided by wrong motives.

Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters: God has chosen poor people to be rich in faith, and the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs, for that is the gift God has promised to all those who love him. And yet, of the two strangers, you have despised the poor person. Don't you realize that it is usually the rich who pick on you and drag you into court? And all too often they are the ones who laugh at Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear.

Yes indeed, it is good when you truly obey our Lord's command, "You must love and help your neighbors just as much as you love and take care of yourself." But you are breaking this law of our Lord's when you favor the rich and fawn over them; it is sin.

Dear brothers and sisters, what's the use of saying that you have faith and are Christians if you aren't proving it by helping others? Will *that* kind of faith save anyone? If you have a friend who is in need of food and clothing, and you say, "Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat hearty," and then don't give clothes or food, what good does that do?

So you see, it isn't enough just to have faith. You must also do good. Faith that doesn't show itself by good works is no faith at all—it is dead and useless.

## Lord, Do I Want to Be a Christian?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 1, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: James 2:1-9, 14-17

“You can't get an address without an address, or a job without a job.”

Dan Clendenin<sup>1</sup> writes eloquent essays about the poor. In one he tells of the movie *Wendy and Lucy*. Wendy and her dog Lucy are stranded in a depressing mill town in Oregon. They've left Indiana for a better life in Alaska but didn't make it past Oregon.. Wendy is frugal and resourceful. She records her expenditures in a spiral notebook. She sleeps in her car, collects cans and bottles for spare change, and freshens up in gas station bathrooms.

After fruitless attempts to find work, Wendy observes to a security guard who's befriended her that you can't get a job without an address or phone number. She has neither, of course. "Heck," he replies, "you can't get an address without an address, or a job without a job. It's all rigged." Minor infractions with rule-keeping bureaucrats reap major consequences for Wendy. When her twenty-year old car needs a \$2,000 repair, we find her in the last scene hopping a train. Where will she go, and what will happen to her?

In *The Working Poor, Invisible in America* (2004), Pulitzer Prize winner David Shipler shows how for people like Wendy poverty can be both a cause of problems and the result of problems: “A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing.” Clendenin opines, “We shouldn't blame the poor for their poverty. Some of the hardest-working people are poor people.”

The writer Barbara Ehrenreich earned a PhD in biology but has made a career as a writer, authoring a dozen books and articles for Time, Harper's Magazine, and The New Republic. Over lunch one day she and her editor were pontificating about American poverty, welfare reform and the like, when she wondered aloud how an unskilled but fully employed worker could survive on low wages: “Someone ought to do the old-fashioned kind of journalism—you know, go out there and try it for themselves.”

When Ehrenreich's editor called her bluff she began an economic experiment that resulted in her bestseller book, *Nickel and Dimed; On (not) Getting By in America* (2001). For six months she lived the life of an unskilled but fully employed wage earner.

In Florida she worked as a waitress on the 2:00-10PM shift, then as a house cleaner for Molly Maid. In Maine she worked as a “dietary aide” at a nursing home and as a hotel maid. In Minnesota she clerked at Wal-Mart, the largest private employer in the nation with 825,000 people on the payroll. Ehrenreich lived in budget motels and dangerous trailer parks, she ate only what she could afford (which tended to be fast food), she discovered that she needed two unskilled jobs just to squeak by, and overall found herself physically and emotionally drained.

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<sup>1</sup> Clendenin's remarks and stories are taken from: <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20060904JJ.shtml> and <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20090831JJ.shtml> accessed August 31, 2013.

As of 2009, the unskilled wage earners that Shipler and Ehrenreich portray constitute about 30% of the American work force who earn less than \$10 per hour according to the Economic Policy Institute. They are the people we pass every day who make our American way of life possible. They clean our office buildings at night, serve us at restaurants, repair our cars, handpick our fresh produce, and mow-n-blow suburban yards. Even though these people work long and hard, they barely make ends meet. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, “in the median state a minimum wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing.”

On a trip to Florida several years ago I was in of all places, Cleveland. I was in Cleveland a full two hours after I was supposed to already be in Orlando. We had run into fog in Cleveland. We circled the airport until the gas was low, flew to Pittsburgh airport to fill the tank, and returned to Cleveland.

Finally my luck changed. At the rebooking counter the airline rep said, “Mr. Rose. We have a seat for you on a flight that leaves in 45 minutes. I looked at the boarding pass. It said 2D. I smiled. I had been bumped up to first class.

Ah, finally on the plane. A wide plush seat. A cold drink even during boarding. I begin to relax. But the man next to me wants to talk. That’s okay. He’s pleasant enough. He works for a pipeline company. We talk a bit about what worries his company has about terrorists. Then the conversation turns to my work. “I’m a minister,” I offer.

Suddenly the man went into high gear. For approximately one hour and 45 minutes I was lectured on the sinfulness of man and the grace of God. I was told how important Jesus was in this man’s life. He told me all about his church, one of the very biggest in Orlando. He said, “It’s the one you can see from the interstate highway.” He told me about his family, and how he disciplined his stepson. He told me about how some people were definitely going to hell and some were saved by faith. Now, I want to say this carefully, because I respect strong faith enormously. And I know personally how important God’s grace, the church and Jesus are in my own life, along with the fact of my own human sinfulness. But there was something off in the conversation. Something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Maybe it had to do with a certain intolerance the man kept expressing. Maybe it had, also, to do with how much he talked and how little he cared to listen.

Several days later I was having dinner with a couple who worked at a college near Orlando. They wanted to talk with me about Biblical studies at Harvard, and they wanted to tell me about their church. They were so excited about their church and their faith that it was almost contagious. I couldn’t help notice how different it felt from the similar conversation on the plane.

I asked one of them what they could tell me that would capture the essence of their church. The woman of the couple said, “I think this story will do. A few years ago,” she said, “we began to have a homeless problem in Orlando really for the first time. It became especially obvious to us when homeless people started sleeping in our church courtyard. Many of them would still be there when church started on Sunday morning. Our board said, ‘We can’t let this go on. This isn’t right.’”

The woman paused enough for me to wonder in my mind what decision the board made. But I didn’t ask the question; I waited for her to go on.

“Well, we decided,” she said, “to make a shelter in part of our building. We just decided that we couldn’t have this problem right on our own doorstep and do nothing about it. We couldn’t ignore these unfortunate people. We put in some showers and beds, and we did pretty well.

“Eventually,” she went on, “the numbers began to grow beyond our ability to manage the situation. So the board wrote a letter to every single church in Orlando. We wrote and told them about what we had been doing. We said that it was a ministry that had outgrown us. And we invited the rest of the churches in Orlando to come together and participate with us. You know what?” she said. “You know what? We didn’t get one single reply from the churches in Orlando.” She paused. “Well, that’s not exactly right,” she confessed. “We did get one reply. That great big church right across from us, the one you can see from the interstate highway, they had their lawyer write us and say, ‘If any of those people show up on our property, we are going to hold you legally responsible. We will sue your church in court.’”

This week we read from the Epistle to James, which says, among other things, “It is usually the rich who pick on you and drag you into court.” You don’t hear James read very much. It’s short. We don’t know much about its origins. But there’s a back story worth relating about how the church came to sideline the Letter of James. When the Reformation came, the Bible moved front and center in Christian life. Ordinary people were allowed, encouraged to read and understand the word of God. The idea was to get as close to the words of Jesus as possible. It soon became accepted fact that the closer in time to Jesus that a book in the Bible was written, the more authoritative that book would be. Scholars soon realized that Paul’s letters were among the earliest writings, so the apostle Paul loomed large in the Protestant imagination. Paul’s greatest contribution was the primacy of faith in the Christian salvation. Faith, not works, became the key. That view still holds sway in much of Protestant Christianity. If you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, that is, if you place your faith in him, you are saved. You cannot save yourself by doing good works.

As you may imagine, Martin Luther, perhaps the most famous advocate of the slogan—faith, not works—did not like the Letter of James. He called it a “right strawy epistle.” Luther said the Letter to James was as lightweight as dry hay.

To help pull off this feat of slandering the Letter of James, Luther and many interpreters after him said the letter was written very late. When I was in divinity school, scholars dated James as one of the latest pieces in the New Testament. If James was one of the last things written, written the farthest from the time of Jesus, well, then it couldn’t be very authoritative. It would be downright strawy. In one fell-swoop the early reformers and the generations that followed them claimed James could be neglected. Its statement “faith without works was dead” was cast on the ash heap.

What got swept away in this windstorm of ‘faith not works’ was not only that personal salvation did not depend on how you lived your life, but also the backbone of Christian social critique. A responsible Christian life took a backseat confessing faith in Jesus.

Ironically, scholars over the last few decades have come to the consensus that James may actually be one of the earliest documents in the New Testament. There is even good reason to believe that it was written by James, the brother of Jesus. You can’t get much closer to Jesus than that. Suddenly the letter’s pedigree has received a substantial bump. Its social critique can no longer so easily be dismissed on the grounds of its distance from Jesus.

As Clendenin notes, James considers it a bitter irony that some early Christians favored the rich and discriminated against the poor. James pictures an early church where believers favored rich people who were dressed in nice clothes and expensive jewelry. They offered them the best seats in church, then patronized the poor and the poorly dressed by seating them where they would not offend anyone.

‘You have insulted the poor,’ writes James. ‘Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?’ (James 2:6-7). Later in his epistle he turns up the heat even higher. These rich people, he says, hoard wealth instead of sharing it, they live in luxury while withholding wages from workers, and they glory in their indulgence. Whereas people often think that their wealth is a sign of God's blessing, James compares their wealth to a toxic chemical that has ‘corroded’ their character and will ‘burn their flesh like fire’ (James 5:1-6).

As we come this day to our own time and reflect on the letter so long ago and think of those who work day in and day out to provide our day of life, we called to consider, do I really want to be a Christian? Do I want to understand the social ethic it requires? Amen.