

## **Diversity in the body of Christ: socio-economic**

When we lived in India we focused on planting churches amongst specific people groups. Some were rich and some were poor depending on their status in society. In my training we were taught not to mix different people groups in one church. Although it made practical sense I was never happy with that teaching. One day we went to a village where we found two churches of the same denomination across the road from each other. One for a high social status group and the other for a low social status group. They all spoke the same language. This really disturbed me as I didn't see that as a Biblical representation of the kingdom of God. The body of Christ is diverse in all aspects: multicultural, personality and gifting, and socio-economically. Let us not use pragmatism to divide the unity of the church. However, when it comes to some practical matters, such as language, then obviously there can be a separation.

James 2:1-13 My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 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 those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? If you really keep the royal law found in 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. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

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) The Lord is the Maker of them all**

- Proverbs 22:2 Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all.
- We live in a world where the rich generally have contempt for the poor. To them the poor are to be tolerated and not accepted.
  - Tolerance is a word that we hear a lot in the world nowadays, as if it's a good concept.
  - We are taught to tolerate people who are different from us racially, religiously, in sexual orientation, economically, and so on. In this message we're focusing on socio-economic tolerance.
  - Tolerance is an endurance of a painful situation or of a person who you really dislike.
  - God doesn't want us to tolerate people of a different socio-economic group from us. He wants us to accept them. He wants us to love them as one of our own without any form of discrimination.
- If the Lord is the Maker of us all we don't have a right to reject his creation.
- Generally, the poor accept the rich. It's more of a case that the rich don't accept the poor, and the root cause of that is pride.
  - Personally, I've been accepted into the homes of poor people everywhere I've been. I've stayed in homes in villages in various parts of South Africa, India, and other places. Poor people have given sacrificially to me sometimes killing an only goat that they owned to give me and our team a good meal.
  - How often do the rich host the poor in their homes and have them over for meals?
- "What has this got to do with the church?" we might ask?
  - The church is the household of God and we need to go beyond accepting one another regardless of socio-economic standings.
  - We need to be intentional in breaking down all worldly mindsets that we have that divide us in any way.
  - Being intentional means that you don't only invite someone if they turn up at your door. It means going out of your way to invite them to your house. It means intentionally visiting someone at their house.

## 2) Keep the royal law

- James 2:8-9 If you really keep the royal law found in 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.
- Showing favoritism makes us as guilty as if we broke any other laws of God – James uses the examples of adultery and murder.
  - Favoritism is a far more subtle sin than sins like adultery and murder, which are obvious.
  - The problem with favoritism is that we have grown up in a society that has shaped our thinking in such a way that we think that we are doing the right thing even when it’s wrong. This is the deceitfulness of sin.
  - In the movie called “Hidden Figures”, which is a true story of how black women were instrumental in the calculations that sent NASA’s first space shuttle into orbit in the 1960’s. At one stage a white woman looks at a black woman and says, “You know, I don’t have anything against you all.” To which the black woman responds, “I know. That’s what you probably believe.”
  - What she was saying is that words without the right actions and attitudes are worthless.
- James highlights the issue by giving an example of a rich man and a poor man coming into the church and the different ways they are treated.
  - James 2:2-4 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?
  - This is a real indictment on the church when we show such kind of favoritism towards the rich and influential and sideline the poor.
- Our attitudes toward the poor can pervade all strata of the church.
  - Would the poor be overlooked for leadership positions in favor of the wealthy?
  - Would they be overlooked to be on organizing committees?
  - Would they be overlooked to carry out important functions in the church?
- Overlooking the poor because of their socio-economic positions is wicked.
- We are called to love your neighbor as yourself, regardless of who they are.
  - We give honor where honor is due.
- Caution has to be taken not to have reverse favoritism and favor the poor over the wealthy just because they are poor.
  - Leviticus 19:15 Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.
  - Proverbs 30:8-9 Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.

## 3) The poor will always be with you

- John 12:7-8 “Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”
- Deuteronomy 15:11 There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.
- Jesus didn’t mean that we should neglect the poor, but that poverty will always be in the world. We cannot and should not use the poor as an excuse not to give our best to God.
  - However, on the other hand, giving our best to God is not an excuse not to be generous towards the poor and the needy amongst us.