

## The 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; Mark 7:24-37; James 2:1-17.

**Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23:** The Old Testament lesson for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time presents proverbs dealing with poverty. But such proverbs can't be examined strictly on their own, but only in light of the essential message of the Bible on poverty.

There are few topics discussed more in scripture than the topic of poverty. There are over 2,000 references to the poor in both Old and New Testaments, and the consistent message throughout the scripture can be divided into three emphases, all found in Deuteronomy 15.

First, ***“there will never cease to be some poor on the earth”*** (Deut. 15:11a). There is a frank awareness that poverty will be a constant of human society. But that does not make poverty acceptable! The biblical writers recognize that, no matter how equitable the rules or intent of a society might be, there will always be those in that society who will live below the mean and those who have the capacity to make money and will live above the mean. In today's nomenclature, that would be understood as “relative poverty” – that is, people who will live below the general standard of living of that society, so that their “poverty” would be relative to the mean. For example, the “poor” here in the United States are far richer than even the middle-class in other parts of the world, but they are “poor” relative to the living standards of the United States. The reality of relative poverty is reluctantly accepted in scripture as inevitable.

What is unacceptable in the scriptures is what is today called “extreme” or “absolute poverty”. No one should live so poor that their very health and existence is threatened. Extreme poverty is today defined as living on an income of less than \$1 a day resulting in chronic hunger, no health care, lack of safe drinking water and sanitation, no children's education and lack of rudimentary shelter. There are 1.1 billion living in extreme poverty, most in Asia and Africa (the U.N. Millennium Project, *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals* (London: Earthscan, 2005).

So the first emphasis of scripture on the topic of poverty is that relative poverty will never be totally eliminated from the earth because, by the very nature of relativity, some will live below the general standard of living of any given society and will thus be classified as “poor”. But that is no excuse for extreme or even moderate (between \$1 a day and \$2 a day) poverty.

Second, ***“there will be no poor among you”*** (Deut. 15:4a). In the Hebrew, this is a command to the nation. It is not optional. It is not negotiable. Society exists to eliminate poverty! The command is to so govern and operate your society that there will be no poor in your midst. In one sense, it is an impossible goal, for there will always be those who live below the mean. But in another sense, it is to be the primary objective of any truly godly society – to keep on working to eliminate even relative (and to totally eradicate extreme and moderate) poverty from your midst. This, according to Deuteronomy, is the chief responsibility both of government and of the economic order, as well as every individual.

What is particularly intriguing in this passage is what follows the command to eliminate poverty. The entire sentence reads, “there will be no poor among you, because the Lord is sure to bless

you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today” (Deut. 15:4-5). In other words, the Deuteronomist is placing this commandment above the hallowed Ten Commandments. God will not guarantee to bless the Israelite people if they keep the Ten. He will bless them “if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing *this* entire commandment”! The totally dedicated effort to eliminate poverty is the ultimate proof-positive that you are a people who love and follow Yahweh! Elimination of poverty is the inevitable outcome of saving faith in God!

Third, “***Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land***” (Deut. 15:11b). The full sentence quoted here incorporates both the first and the third points in one statement. “Since there will never cease to be some poor on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” (15:11). What the Deuteronomist is saying here is profound. He has earlier taught that the entire intent of Israel’s government, economic order and religious system should be the elimination of poverty within that country. The Bible teaches that the chief end of government, the economy and the values systems of a society is to be the elimination of poverty. And the rest of Deuteronomy lays out economic, political and religious policies that will accomplish that end (e.g., the observance of the Sabbatical year and its redistribution of wealth every seven years, charging no interest on loans, providing for the economic training and business development of the poor, committing 10% of the nation’s wealth to fight poverty, etc.). But now the writer of Deuteronomy takes it a step further.

First, it is not only the responsibility of the systems to eliminate poverty. It is your responsibility and mine! We are to “open our hand to the poor and needy neighbor in our land”. This writer is specific. Don’t rely on the systems to eliminate poverty. Don’t depend upon the political, economic and religious orders to get the job done. Get engaged yourself! Get actively engaged – whether it be done politically, economically or through the practice of your values – in fighting poverty and in working for the liberation of the poor! “Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your poor neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be” (15:7b-8). Get personally engaged in fighting poverty. And get engaged at levels where it hurts – not just in charity or largess, but in coming alongside the poor to work in league with them as they work to overcome their own poverty, even loaning them the capital and providing technical support to them (Deut. 26 1-19) so that they might free themselves from poverty!

It is against this backdrop of the Hebrew responsibility to fight poverty that the three proverbs of today’s Old Testament lesson can be best understood.

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all” (Prov. 22:1-2).

Each proverb in the Bible is stated twice, with the second proverb being an elaboration (or saying the same point differently) of the first. It is the two twined proverbs that are then considered the actual proverb. That is what is occurring in 22:1-2.

A similar proverb is quoted in 29:13, “The poor and the oppressor have this in common: the Lord gives light to the eyes of both”. In either case, what is essentially being said in this proverb is that, as human beings, we are on equal footing. One of us might happen to be richer, better positioned, more educated or more privileged than the other person. But the fact of the matter is that we are all created by God as equals, as human beings equally facing the potentials and difficulties of life. Therefore, to conduct oneself in an honorable and responsible way is far more important than status, privilege or wealth, for we all stand under God as our Creator and Judge.

“Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor” (22:8-9).

The second parable in this duo actually says in the Hebrew, “Those who have a bountiful eye are blessed” – that is, those who can see potential and abundance for the poor and know how to call that forth are those who are the blessed people on this earth.

In other words, what the proverb is stressing is that one who is open and receptive to the needy will himself be blessed by his own generosity. Our well-being is bound up in the well-being of others and particularly in those who can’t repay our generosity. Thus, authentic self-interest is interest in another’s good!

“Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them” (22:22-23).

Although the translators of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible have chosen to translate the Hebrew word *qaba* as “despoil”, an alternate translation would be “rob”<sup>1</sup>. So translated, the real power of the sentence is revealed: “The Lord robs of life those who rob the poor”! What goes around comes around. You treat the poor harshly, and God will make sure you get treated harshly yourself. You ignore the plight of the poor, and God will ignore you!

God, this proverb is declaring, is the ultimate advocate for the poor (cf. Psalm 9:18). Any wealth you have is wealth given you by God (Deut. 8:6-20), for God has placed within you the capacity and acumen to make wealth. Therefore, all that you have is a gift from God. In the light of that recognition, to not be concerned for the poor and to not put that concern into action that works for the abolition of poverty is to risk divine retribution!

**Psalm 125** is hard to understand apart from an appreciation of the times in which it was written. The psalm is clearly an exilic or post-exilic psalm, written after the nation had been conquered and taken into Babylonian exile. It is an attempt by the Jews to understand what had happened to them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Qaba* can be translated “spoil”, “despoil”, “rob”, “deceive” or “fix”. The sense of the word is that of inevitable retribution – that is, that whatever the evil it is that you have done, God will cause that evil to turn on you and demand its retribution. Thus, you “deceive” someone and you’ll end up “deceived”. You “fix” something to benefit yourself, and God will “fix” it to demand retribution. You “spoil” or “despoil” others, and you will be despoiled. You “rob” others and you’ll find yourself “robbed” of Godly qualities. In other words, you inevitably pay a price for the evil that you do.

A popular belief held by Jews (including the nation's leaders) before the exile was the inviability of Jerusalem. It was believed that since the Temple was there, Yahweh would never allow the city (and, consequently, the nation) to fall. One only needed to point to the miraculous deliverance of Israel from the massive siege brought against it by the Assyrians a hundred years earlier to argue belief in Jerusalem's inviability. If Assyria couldn't conquer Judah then, then Babylonia couldn't conquer Judah now!

But that was precisely what the Babylonian Empire did. In 586 BCE, Babylon not only took Jerusalem but destroyed it and its Temple and took Judah's leadership into exile. Now, those exiled leaders tried to devise an explanation for what they had earlier considered unthinkable. And this psalm is such an explanation.

"Those who trust in Yahweh are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time on and forevermore" (125:1-2). Here is stated the proposition. The leaders and people of Israel are called to trust God. God is utterly trustworthy; one can count on that fact! Thus, just like the mountains that surround Jerusalem are like a girdle that contains and secures the city, so God's commitment to Israel is like a girdle that surrounds the nation and its people with security. The question is not whether God will so protect. The question is whether we will trust God (and stay focused on Him) to protect us.

But now comes the explanation of what went wrong, of what happened that caused Jerusalem to fall to Babylon:

"For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, so that the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong" (vs. 3). This is the way the NRSV chooses to translate the Hebrew. But there is a peculiar parallelism in the Hebrew which almost turns this sentence into a proverb, and if that parallelism is accentuated, then it can be translated in a most intriguing way. Here is this translation:

"The scepter of the wicked surely will not extend over the land allotted to the just, provided the just do not extend their hands into mischief".<sup>2</sup>

In other words, what the psalmist is declaring is that a pagan nation like Babylonia, seeking to conquer Jerusalem (and, therefore, Judah) will not be successful, "provided the just (i.e., Israel) do not extend their hands into mischief". In other words, the psalmist is declaring that the inviability of Jerusalem was a conditional inviability! It was not automatic that God would protect Jerusalem, no matter what the Jewish people might choose to do or not do. God would protect the city, but only if the people would "not extend their hands into mischief".

But that was precisely what Israel's leaders and people did do. They extended their hands into mischief. The kings chose to rule unilaterally, amassing power for themselves and no longer

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<sup>2</sup> See the technical description of this passage by Mitchell Dahood, Professor of Ugaritic Language and Literature at the Pontifical Biblical Institute of Rome, in his masterly exegesis, *Psalms*, Vol. III of the Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 214-216.

judging the people justly. Their economic leaders became concerned about building their personal wealth at the expense of the nation's poor, thus directly disobeying the commandment given them by Moses in Deuteronomy 15. And the religious leaders covered over this abuse of power and wealth by declaring "the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord" (see Jer. 7). In taking this position, the Psalmist was expanding on a position also taken by Ezekiel the prophet (18:24) who declared, "When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live?". The psalmist, taking Ezekiel's insight that a person – even a "righteous" person – must be responsible for his actions, and expands it to the political, economic and religious leaders and systems of Judah, thus declaring that if "their hands do mischief", they can't expect God to continue his protection of Jerusalem!

In the light of this assertion, the psalmist then completes the psalm. "Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts. But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways, the Lord will lead away with evildoers" (vss. 4-5a). Live your lives committed to responsibility for the poor and to treating people justly and with love – and God will protect and secure you. Live your lives to build your own power and wealth, and to control life around you – and God will bring your own actions upon your own head! You get what you give. What goes around comes around.

Therefore the Psalmist, believing he had now addressed the dilemma of God's refusal to protect Jerusalem, can conclude, "Peace be upon Israel!" (vs. 5b). Shalom – God's welfare, security, peace, prosperity, and protection will come upon those who show themselves peaceful. And those who demonstrate that they are "shalom-makers" make up those who are the authentic Israel, not those who declare "Lord, Lord" but "extend their hands into mischief"!

**Mark 7:24-37** is the story of Jesus' healing of two Gentiles. The significance of these two stories and their strategic inclusion in the Gospel of Mark are not apparent unless one first understands the status of Gentiles in the Jewish world. Every day the Pharisees would praise God that they had not been born a dog, a woman or a Gentile! Although Rome held considerable political, economic and military power that dominated Israel, all Romans and Gentiles were still despised by Jews. The Jewish priesthood, Pharisees and Sadducees might collude with Rome in order to exercise political and economic control over their people. But they considered themselves far superior to the Romans, participating in an act of practical politics that was regrettably and even distastefully necessary. It is against this backdrop of the hatred Israelites had for the Gentiles (and especially for Rome) that one gains appreciation for the nuances of these two stories by Mark.

Jesus takes his disciples to the city of Tyre (7:24) in order for them to go on retreat together. Tyre was a Gentile city on the Mediterranean coast considerably northwest of Galilee and clearly outside historic Israel and far from the attacks of the Pharisees and the Jewish leadership. From Tyre, Jesus and his disciples go to Sidon (7:31), which is even further north and east of Jewish Galilee. Finally, he and his disciples then proceed to the Decapolis (7:31), a region of ten cities southeast of the Sea of Galilee and still considerably within Gentile territory

What is Mark seeking to communicate by describing these journeys of Jesus? He is stating that Jesus is circumscribing Israel, going “into all the world”, symbolized by Tyre (northwestern seacoast), Sidon (northern Syria) and the Decapolis (east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River).<sup>3</sup> Jesus is the first of the Christian movement in bringing the gospel to the Gentile world!

What occurs in Jesus’ visits to Tyre and the Decapolis is particularly telling in understanding the mission to which Mark is calling the entire church. In Tyre, the text tells us that Jesus and his disciples are on retreat together and traveling incognito (7:24b). They are not there to carry Jesus’ message into the Gentile world, but instead are there to escape from the relentless pursuit of the Jewish crowds and the relentless criticism of Israel’s leadership. They are there to make ready for Jesus return to Jerusalem to set up his kingdom and to face betrayal and execution.

But “a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet” (vs. 25). She implores Jesus to heal her daughter, which he initially refuses to do, stating, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (note the Pharisees prayer in the first paragraph) (vs. 27). But the woman boldly responds, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (vs. 28). And Jesus, struck by her chutzpah, relents and heals her daughter.

There are several significant items worth noting in understanding this story to the fullest. First, Jesus had not meant for this trip to be a mission to the Gentiles. He had meant it as a time of solitude for himself and his closest followers as they prepared themselves for what Jesus knew would be the climatic completion of his ministry. The same would be true of the later incident in the Decapolis. But Jesus could not so easily separate mission from reflection. Mission was going to break through upon him in both places, and he would rally to such need and respond.

Second, the person of the woman who confronts Jesus in this story is of particular importance to Mark. He tells us specifically that she was “a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin” (vs. 26). He doesn’t want us to miss the significance of what was happening here. She is, first of all, a woman. Second, she is a Gentile (the Greek actually says that she is “a Greek”). And she is a Syrophenician – that is, her lineage was Phoenician and she is from Syria. In other words, what Mark is doing by laying out such genealogical detail is saying, “This *woman* is a Gentile – I mean a *Gentile* – I mean a *Gentile of the Gentiles* – I mean, she is as Gentile as a Gentile can get. There is not an ounce, not an inch, not even a centimeter of Jewish blood in her! She is absolutely, thoroughly, totally a Gentile. She is the lowest of the low! They don’t get any lower than this!”

This is precisely the point Mark wants to make – for the reader to recognize that this woman was thoroughly and totally a pagan, without a speck of Jewishness in her. The rest of this story and of the Gospel of Mark itself depends upon the reader clearly recognizing this fact.

Third, even though she is not Jewish, the woman displays unbelievable chutzpah. In her confrontation of Jesus, this woman breaks every social convention that existed in the Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> The area to the south of Israel was uninhabited desert and to the west was the Mediterranean Sea. So by going northwest, northeast, east and southeast, Jesus was visiting every Gentile territory surrounding Israel.

world. A woman was not to address a man in public; she could speak only if she were first spoken to by that man, thus giving her permission to speak. Secondly, a Gentile would not speak to a Jew, unless it was to transact business or politics. Third, a Gentile woman would never speak to a Jewish man. And, finally, to interrupt a rabbi in his retreat was unthinkable for anyone to do – whether Jewish or Gentile, whether a man or a woman. It simply wasn't done.

When the woman so confronted Jesus, his appropriate response would have been to ignore her. But Jesus didn't. He responded to her petition. This was even more unthinkable than her inappropriate conduct toward him. By her confronting of Jesus, the woman had broken all the taboos of Israelite society – but that made little difference to her, because she was a Gentile. But for Jesus to acknowledge her presence and respond to her, engaging her in conversation, Jesus had broken even greater taboos. A rabbi, so insulted, should have ignored her. Instead, Jesus responded to her, and by doing so had knowingly radically reduced his prestige and status as a rabbi. He had been “shamed” by this woman, and he had accepted that shame!

Jesus' reply to her was to rebuff her. He sharply thwarts her advances by responding, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs”(the Jewish term for a Gentile) (vs. 27). The good news of the coming of God's jubilee kingdom that affords to all Israel the hope for political, economic and spiritual liberation, justice and transformation is not for the Gentiles, Jesus says. It is for the Jews alone. The nourishment of the gospel (“the children's food”) is meant for Israel (“the children”), not for the Gentiles (the “dogs”). This is a shocking declaration – even a slur – on Jesus' part.

Or is it? Does Jesus actually waver in his statement, indicating by the words he uses that he is actually open to discussion and even debate about what he has just declared? The actual Greek contains something totally unexpected at this point, and thoroughly inconsistent with the sharp words Jesus has just spoken. The Greek that is translated “dogs” is actually “little dogs” or “puppies” (that is, “household pets”). That unexpected slight deviation in his argument opens Jesus to a telling rejoinder. And the woman takes advantage of it!

“Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs”, the woman answers Jesus. Yes, the good news of the Jubilee kingdom is meant for the Jews. But it can spill over into the Gentile world as well, and Gentiles can hungrily consume it. The woman has undercut Jesus' argument!

Jesus, obviously admiring this woman's intelligence, determination and chutzpah, responds positively to her argument and instantly heals her daughter. Thus the story ends, “So the woman went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone” (7:30)!

This woman is the only person in the Gospel of Mark who wins an argument against Jesus! In fact, she does more than that. She confronts Jesus and calls him to accountability. And he accepts her criticism. Jesus allows himself to be corrected by this thoroughly Gentile woman. And in doing so, makes himself as lowly as it would be possible for a Jewish rabbi to become. Jesus has lost all status because he is receptive to what this woman has to say to him.

But there is more to it than that. This woman demonstrates to Jesus the absolute necessity of broadening his ministry to the whole world. His gospel is no longer for the Jews alone. He must now actively go to the Gentile world. And so he sets forth on a mission that circumscribes all of Israel, as he carries his message to thoroughly-Gentile Syria, Trachanitus and the Decapolis.

The lesson Mark is presented to the Israelite Christians in 65-70 A.D. is made profoundly clear in this story. If it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for you! If Jesus would learn from a Gentile woman and carry his gospel into the Gentile world, then you Christians should do so also. Do not fear the return of Rome to conquer your rebellious nation,<sup>4</sup> for that conquering will thrust you forth into a strange and unknown world. Instead, grasp that apparent tragedy as opportunity. Follow the example of Christian leaders like Paul, Silas, Barnabas and Timothy and sally forth to spread the news of the coming of God's world of economic equity, political justice and personal relationship with God. Work for God's kingdom, but no longer work for it solely in Israel, but "to the uttermost parts" of the Roman and Gentile world!

The next story builds upon this pace-setting story of the Syrophoenician woman. Jesus and his disciples go to the Gentile territory of the Decapolis, east of Israel. The people bring to Jesus a deaf and mute man whom they beg Jesus to heal. Jesus spits into his hands, touches the tongue of the man and places his finger in the man's ears, and then says "Ephphatha" ("be opened") (7:32-34). Mark then tells us that "immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly" (vs. 35). Jesus ordered the crowd to keep silent about it, but of course they didn't. Instead, Mark tells us, "they were astounded beyond measure" (vs. 37a).

This story is the necessary and inevitable conclusion to the story of the Syrophoenician woman. If Jesus' healing of the woman's daughter suggests that God's Kingdom has come to the Gentile world as well as the Jewish world, the restoring of the hearing and speech of this man carries it far beyond simply healings or even proclamation of the gospel.

The healing of this man at the behest of the crowd evokes a profound response from them. Mark writes, "Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the blind to speak"" (vss. 36-37).

These Gentiles were so overwhelmed by what they witnessed in the healing of this deaf mute man that they disobeyed Jesus! He couldn't control them any longer. They were so "astounded beyond measure" that they would not keep silence (which in essence was "blowing Jesus' cover"). Instead, they proclaimed to any who would listen, "Jesus has done everything well!"

The contrast is so obvious, it almost hurts. The Jewish leaders – the Pharisees, Sadducees and priesthood – did everything to minimize, criticize and destroy Jesus' ministry. These were the people who were theologically informed and therefore ought to have recognized what was

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<sup>4</sup> Israel had revolted against Rome in 65 A.D. and had been successful in both defeating the occupying Roman army and in thrusting all vestiges of Roman rule out of their country. In 70 A.D., a giant Roman army returned led by Rome's outstanding general, annihilated the Jewish army, sacked Jerusalem, burned the Temple to the ground and totally subjugated Israel. The Gospel of Mark was written to Jewish Christians living in Israel, and was written between 65 and 70 A.D. – after Rome had been pushed out of Israel and before Rome returned!



happening through the ministry of Jesus. But, instead, they were all too fixated on protecting their own political, economic and religious power to acknowledge what God was about. Likewise, the Jewish people embraced with enthusiasm the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus, but only for what they could get out of it for themselves.

But here, in Gentile territory, the response was different. Here, in the Gentile world, there are Syrophenician women who stand toe-to-toe with Jesus, friends of a deaf and mute man who will not take “no” for an answer, and Gentile people who not only hear Jesus gladly but are willing to disobey him in order to share with others about this remarkable man. Here, in the Gentile world, there was a wide and open reception to Jesus and to the gospel he proclaimed. Thus, Mark is saying to his Jewish Christian readers, “Take the leap. Take the risk. Reach out to the Gentile world, and live out, practice and proclaim the gospel there. For it will be among the Gentiles that you will find the greatest receptivity to the gospel!”

Soon Israel will fall to Rome and will be destroyed as a viable political entity (this occurred in 70 A.D.). The Temple will be destroyed, and the Jewish people and their leaders will be scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Israel will be finished as a viable nation. But the transforming message and work of Jesus will continue, as it spreads first throughout the empire and then to the uttermost parts of the earth. When that day comes, become a part of the solution and not a part of the problem. Reach out to this new and fearful world. Go throughout the world as Jesus went throughout his Gentile world. Begin feeding the “puppies” under the table with gospel food. Cast out demons from sick children, open mouths and unstop ears. And the world will stand astounded at you, declaring, “They do everything well; they even make the deaf to hear and the mute to speak!”

**James 2:1-17** continues the biblical theme regarding concern for the poor. Here, James puts a unique twist on it. He states unilaterally that if one discriminates against the poor in favor of the rich, then that person is violating God’s perfect law (vs. 8: see 1:34). Obviously, there must have been some incidents of this occurring in Christian churches for James to write against the practice so specifically. Christians are not to treat the rich with favoritism. And James gives two reasons for making that argument.

First, he argues, “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him” (2:5)? As we explored in the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday, God’s concern for the poor is an essential given throughout the scripture (cf. Deut. 10:18; Ps. 68:5; Amos 2:6-7; Luke 1:51-53; 6:20). God has particular compassion toward the poor, and, as God’s people, so should we. That unique choice of the poor is not because there is something uniquely blessed about being poor, but rather the absence of worldly goods often creates a greater dependence upon God and a willingness to be open to God’s leading (“You cannot serve God and money”).

Second, James argues that Christians are to be responsive toward the poor rather than the rich because “Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you” (2:6-7)? In other words, what James is arguing is that if there is any group of people who will more likely take advantage

of the Christian, whether through politics or economics or even religion, it will be the wealthy and the powerful (see also I Peter 4:4).

There is a particular word that James uses in his attack against the rich in verses 6-7 that throws profound light on the entire passage, and on James' intent. That is the word "oppress" in his rhetorical question, "Is it not the rich who oppress you" (2:6)? The verb James uses here is a particularly strong word that is most often used to refer to the oppressive work of Satan (cf. Acts 10:38). The rich person's use of power is Satanically oppressive, James is stating. They use their political, economic, judicial and even religious powers to exploit and oppress the poor and the needy of this world, because their primary commitment is to maintain their own power and wealth, even if that is at the expense of the poor. The poor, on the other hand, only seek to survive, and to make life as worthwhile as possible within the constraints of that survival. Therefore, if a Christian was going to use favoritism, the favoritism he should use should be toward the poor, not the rich!

But what this passage is primarily about is the elimination of favoritism toward anyone in the church. God does call us to discern between good and evil, between justice and oppression, sharing of wealth and exploitation, building authentic relationship with God or using religion to control and dominate people. So we are to develop the capacity to discern both the wise and the self-serving use of power on the part of every institution and person.

But we are not to discriminate against people because of some superficial cultural standards. Economic status, racial differences, ethnic preferences, political position, religious status is not the means for deciding between people. Rather, it is whether there is "purity of heart to will one thing" (Kierkegaard) that should cause us to decide for or against a person. The distinction is whether a given person is working for justice, loving all around him with godly love, and is "walking humbly with God" (Micah 6:8) that should cause us to gravitate toward him or her.

James then gets to the heart of the issue. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:14-17)!

People always want to place Paul the Apostle and James in a boxing ring over the issue of faith. Paul states, "A person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). But James says, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17). Who is right? Is one saved through faith and not by works? Or are works necessary, along with faith? Do good deeds save you? Or are you saved only through faith?

It is a specious argument. Paul and James have not drawn up opposing camps on the dynamics of salvation. The issue is not "faith alone" or "faith and works together" – the issue over which the Protestant reformation was fought because of the misinterpretation of Paul's theology by the medieval Catholic Church. What Paul meant by "works" was entirely different than what James meant. And any careful study of the use of these words by these respective early church leaders makes that quite clear.

When Paul talks about “works”, he usually uses the phrase “works of the Law”. And even when he doesn’t, it is clear that is what he means. What Paul wanted to maintain is that obeying the Jewish Law – obeying commandments like Sabbath rules or dietary restrictions or circumcision – were not only unnecessary for salvation, but a complete misunderstanding of God’s salvific work. All that was needed for salvation, Paul taught, was trust in Jesus Christ as God’s means for salvation.

When James used the word, “works”, he was referring to works of mercy and charity, advocating for the poor, defending the m, treating the powerless with respect, and even working with them to bring about justice. James is seeking to correct the misinterpretation of Paul’s theology that Christians were using in order to avoid social responsibility both within their churches and in the world. Rather than concentrating on obedience to the regulations of Jewish law that so concerned Paul, James is concentrating on the actions of Christians, and the relationships of those actions to their faith.

What James is stating most pragmatically is that faith without works cannot save. How do we know that a person’s profession of faith is authentic – that they are truly right with God? Well, you don’t listen to their profession of faith. You don’t listen to their claims of faith. You don’t listen to their words. You look at their lives! You look for signs of compassion, charity, concrete and practical working for justice, advocating the cause of the poor, working to empower the weak of the world. And when you see that together with their profession of faith in Christ, then you know that this profession is authentic. It is their works that authenticate their faith, not whether they say they love Jesus! Seeking faith manifested in working for justice is the only authentication of true faith, James insists in his epistle. What would happen to the church today if we would truly believe and practice James’ principle?

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