

## Bible Notes – James 2

On the whole, James 2 is not a difficult chapter to understand. It might be a very difficult one to obey, but that is quite a different kind of problem!

The chapter opens with a challenge to the church about favouritism – we might say we are open to all, and that everyone will be welcomed, but is that really the case? Our churches pride themselves on being friendly, but it is worth reflecting on the difference between what it is to be ‘friendly’ and what it is to be ‘welcoming’. The former is brilliant for those who are already inside the club, and for those who have the perseverance and personality necessary to gain admission – but what about those on the outside? We’re actually not that good at welcoming even those strangers who are actually quite like us – and that’s before one takes into account the natural human bias to be not quite so welcoming to those whom we find challenging: those, for instance, whose lives are chaotic, or who very obviously suffer from mental illnesses, or who live in ways very different from our own. James says: you’ve got to resist that bias. You have got to welcome everyone with the dignity that belongs to them as a child of God, disregarding whatever internal calculator of status the world has made us used to (this, incidentally, is a good example of what the last verse of James 1 meant when it warned disciples to keep themselves ‘unstained’ by the world).

It’s right to recognise that wealth and poverty aren’t the only issues in play here: we tend to include and exclude people on all sorts of other grounds as well. But James’ focus is largely on the straightforwardly economic, which means that should be front and centre in our minds too. A key message of James 2 for the church today, and for each of us personally, is: what does your religion mean for those with no money? Are they genuinely treated like your brothers and sisters – and (another way of saying the same thing) are their material needs addressed? What does it mean for the poor that *you* are a Christian, and what does it mean for them that *we* are here as a church? At the personal level the answer should involve a serious degree of generosity with your money and perhaps even time, and that the

needs of the poor should be constantly in your mind when you make consumer or electoral choices. At the church level, it means things like our support for the Malawi Project and for the Watford Food Bank – and the question for us when we come to revise the Mission Action Plan (the church's priorities for the next three years) in 2020 is how to deepen and expand those commitments.

It shouldn't really need underlining, but just in case it does: James says that none of this is optional. We may indeed have different ideas about how best to serve the poor – that's fair enough. But that the poor should be served is non-negotiable, bottom-line Christianity. That's why vv.2-13 follow on naturally from vv.1-7: James' point is that if you neglect this 'bit' of discipleship, you've broken the whole thing. There's no point priding yourself on being a good church person, or having strong personal morals about sex or honesty or hard work or any good other values, if at the same time you neglect the poor. Like a tyre that cannot be just a little bit punctured, if God's law is broken at one point it is broken in its entirety.

Vv.14-26 are the ones which enraged Martin Luther so much. He viewed himself as recovering the authentically Pauline Gospel, which emphasised that there was *nothing* a human being could do to merit or deserve salvation, which could only be received as a gift, through faith alone. James seems to say quite the opposite: 'faith without works is dead.' (2:17). For this reason, Luther judged the letter 'an epistle of straw' and relegated it to last place in his translation of the New Testament – he really would have much preferred to jettison it altogether. However, that's principally because when Luther read Paul talking about how 'works of the law' cannot save anyone (as he does frequently in Romans or Galatians, say), Luther assumed this meant things like concern for the poor. But actually, what Paul was really on about was the works required by the Law as markers of Jewish identity: circumcision, dietary restrictions, sabbath observance. Paul's point was that it was no longer essential to be Jewish to be part of God's people. It would never have occurred to him to say that it was not essential to be morally transformed – and indeed, for that transformation to have at its heart practical action for the poor.