

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

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.

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.

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.

James 2:1-8, 17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. 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? But you have dishonored the poor. 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? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

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.

“The Maker of Them All”

In seminary I was exposed for the first time to an education with a “precept” system. This meant that we spent the third hour of every lecture broken into small groups to delve deeper into the readings and lectures for the week. Sometimes our precepts were led by the professor, sometimes by Ph.D. students who were assistants for the classes. Generally, your preceptor was also your grader. In intensive summer language, you were just out of luck if your preceptor couldn't teach worth a lick. One of the best small group leaders was a man named Ratiffe. He was a fine teacher and he gave some of the most substantial comments on my papers during my Princeton experience in that Missiology class.

Ratiffe grew up in South Africa. He started our first precept by sharing his faith story and what had led him to Princeton for his Ph.D. Usually our preceptors just got down to business and did little sharing. Ratiffe is a white South African, now in his upper thirties. He grew up in the midst of apartheid and was taught by his church that the privilege of whites and the system of injustice towards coloreds and blacks was ok, it was God ordained. Sure there was the occasional admonition for restraint and civility but in general—this was God's way. Ratiffe was a teen when he went off to a church conference or camp and he listened to a guest speaker with a different theology from his

home church. This man spoke of God's command to love neighbor in a radical way. He claimed that God was on the side of the poor and oppressed. He gave ample biblical examples! Ratiffe realized that for the first time he was hearing the good news! He felt liberated from the sick feeling he would get when he saw whites claim privilege and misuse people of color, when he thought about the laws of his government—all of which had been sanctioned by his church. It dawned on him that he had been hoodwinked all those years—buying into a message that wasn't good, for anyone. He had been captive to ideology all that time although his church told him he was blessed and free.

Ratiffe sat before us, because God had placed on his heart the desire to help Christianity claim and repent for our mistakes. He believed the worldwide Christian church must work in a new way, and work ecumenically, so rich and poor, black and white, male and female, easterner and westerner could be set free from that which binds us. We did talk about the reading that day—something about the beginning of the first truly ecumenical conference that took place since early Christianity in the late 1800s. My mind and heart were stuck on Ratiffe's witness. I was remembering some of the Christian teachings I'd heard that were destructive and wondering if I could ever have the courage to stand up to them with love, with love for all people, as Ratiffe had since he claimed his liberation by the good news he heard while away at camp.

Frances Taylor Gench concisely names that which was on my heart. "How is it that the prejudices of the world rather than the preferences of God come to be manifested in the community of God's people?"¹

A title of a song on the *Prairie Home Companion* sums up a theme every one of the lectionary texts claims, "You don't love God, if you don't love your neighbor!" In our passages, our neighbors spoken of are the poor, the one who is different, or the afflicted. Yet all of us need the liberating words of our texts this week. It does no good to show favor to the rich and seat them in special places as James notes—it's an oppression of the privileged which does horrible things to their souls, especially if they forget they are interconnected to others by God.

The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all. It always seems to me that the neighbor easiest for us to overlook is the one in extreme need, in poverty, blighted we might even say. For what can we do to address a situation so prevalent in the world and so far from a sustainable outcome of transformation?

Here is what it boils down to if we believe that God is creator and claim the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (including his teachings), and the Spirit's empowerment. There is no justifiable way to ignore the plight of the poor or the oppressed. "Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause..." God is public defender of the cause of the afflicted and poor in the world. We are given the honor of joining with God and claiming our interconnectedness. The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.

So, the Christian must lift up the poor. Possibly though, and even more important to our health and wholeness, we must also be willing to be lifted up by them. After learning from those so totally opposite of us on an economic level, or from those who have been oppressed, we might be able to claim the contagious joy of those who have utterly relied on God to survive and tell of God's love and mercy.

Maybe it's the tenacity of the poor or of those on the fringes of society that is the scariest thing to overcome in forming relationships with them. We don't have the boldness they do. Remember Mark's story of the woman who sought out Jesus to heal her daughter (Mark 7:24-37). After hearing her plea for her daughter's health he said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." To break it down, that meant, go away Greek woman, I am here to teach, preach and heal Jews, not you—or your sick daughter! He denied her request, but she didn't leave. We might say, well ok I'll figure it out on my own then, and walk away in self sufficiency. She refused to get up and go away. She thought for a minute, and said, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Ah! She is right. Some of the crumbs slip through the cracks, providing food for the persistent. The crumbs fall, Jesus, even to me.

Is it possible her retort that considered and then shamed Jesus' food allocation argument struck home, most closely, in Jesus' stomach? As a drifter who relied on hospitality Jesus was used to eating crumbs! Maybe this outsider, this woman whom a good Jew of the day would look down upon, sparked some righteous indignation in Jesus that made him question why some are given God's sustenance, while others are left to suffer. "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." We all need sustenance, we all need God! In Jesus God pleads the cause of the poor and oppressed, mentioned in Proverbs, through firsthand knowledge. God was and is and chose to be one of the poor. Jesus mission was shaped by them and became unabashedly for them.

Like all people of faith before us, God calls to us to open our hearts to those who are strangers, widows, orphans, hungry, sick or poor. One weekly online commentator, Dan Clendenin writes, "James made the community's response to the poor a touchstone for testing the authenticity of its faith. Christians should favor the poor not because of any political [or theological] agenda of the right or left, but because we're called to imitate the character of God."² The writer of the Epistle of James "reminds us all that we are accountable to God for our words and deeds. ... We have already been saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. What is to be revealed is whether or not we have misused the grace that is ours—whether or not we have embodied in our lives the possibilities the gospel offers."³

The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.
Amen.

¹ France Taylor Gench, *Hebrews and James*, Westminster Bible Companion (WJKP: Louisville, KY, 1996) 101-2.

² Dan Clendenin, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20060904JJ.shtml>

³ Gench, 103.