

Text: Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23; James 2:1-17

Title: Status in the Kingdom

Date: September 6. 2009

In the last couple of weeks we've talked about forgiveness, the realization that God doesn't need our help in meting out Justice. And we've talked about generosity- since we place ourselves firmly in God's grace it follow that God has created us to be partners in ministry- giving to us what we have so that we may share it with others. OK, so far, so good. Now we are going to something really sticky- status.

Yes I know, no one wants to admit we are status conscious. It's un-American, in this land where all are created equal. It's un-Christian – for we all stand before God as forgiven sinners, no one better or worse than one another. Or at least we tell those things to ourselves. But we have a problem- we are human- and from the very beginning we have sought status. From caveman burials with their arrowheads, to Viking funerals, to the Pyramids to CSPAN- we seek status.

Status is about the honor or prestige accorded our position. James doesn't knock status- he redirects it. If status is about seeking attention and recognition, James wants to ask, just who is it that you are trying to impress anyway? We shouldn't be surprised. Do you remember who James was? James was the leader of the Jerusalem church. James was the guy who sent Barnabas to Antioch to check out the almost spontaneous growth of the church there. James is the guy who Barnabas and Paul defend their outreach to the Gentiles and who gives his OK. James is the guy who keeps the Jerusalem Christian community out of the war between the Jewish revolutionaries and the Romans (and is martyred for his trouble in 62.) James is a Christian, but he is a Jewish Christian. So we should not be surprised that James takes the same position that Proverbs does on status.

Ancient Israel was an honor/shame culture- that is that they felt that one's status, one's honor was an outward reflection of one's relationship with God. think about Job, who looses everything and all he friends can say is what did you do to get God mad at you? and when God restores Job he gets more than he lost. Proverbs says that it doesn't work that way. God does not bless the rich or punish the poor- God creates them both and that it is the duty of the rich to take care of the poor. Proverbs actually

links honor and good reputation to how well one aids and defends the poor- and those who oppress the poor instead- they have to answer to Yahweh!

Keeping this in mind , James paints a terrible picture of a church who falls over itself kissing up to the rich guy while turning its back on the poor guy, to the point that the poor guy isn't even given a chair! How messed up is that? By doing that the members of the church- not the rich guy- have judged the poor man in the very same way that Proverbs told them not to!

After repeating Proverbs point that God has created both the rich and the poor- that economic status has nothing to do with one's status before God and that those who have need to share with those who don't- James does something really interesting- he hearkens back to the 10 commandments. Now I confess that most of the time I find myself thinking of the 10 Commandments as 10 separate laws. You ever find yourself doing this? So I tell a little white lie (bearing false witness) that's not as bad as, say, adultery- or even murder! "Wrong!", "says James. They are not 10 separate laws- they are One Law- and if you break any part of the Law, you have broken ALL of the Law.

James speaks of the "royal law" and then quotes Leviticus 19:18. Remember- his roots are Judaism- and he does not have Matthew's Gospel in front of him. But if he had he probably would have quoted Matt 22: 34-40 *When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, " "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."* This is how the King sums up the Law- this is the operative law for the Kingdom- so why not call it royal law?

James' point is that when we look through the eyes of status, as least through the eyes of earthly status- we break the Law. The person who claims to live according to the Law of the Kingdom, yet still practices the sort of discriminating that the royal law forbids has broken ALL of the Law. Not only have they offended against the Law- they have offended against the Lawgiver. James is not making a theological statement about

the nature of sin; he is far too practical for that. Remember, James is all about Torah-providing practical guidelines on how we are to live.

So he moves right back to the scenario that he painted in the opening verses. Last week he told us to be doers of the word and not just hearers of the word. Now he's asking us what good does it do anyone if we do not reach out and help others. Last week we challenged each other to be generous, to invest ourselves in the people around us, whether it was taking someone out, offering a listening ear or to encourage someone to do more and be more. How did it go? How did it make you feel? I'd be willing to bet that it felt pretty good to know that you were being used by God to impact that person's life. When James says what good is it, we tend to hear that as scolding us- what he is saying that it is good, that caring for others not only fulfills the law of the Kingdom- it is good for us- tying us into God's intention of how life should be lived.

We started by talking about status, this seeming need we have to demonstrate the prestige and honor position. Jesus doesn't have a problem with that, He simply redirects it. When James and John's mother asked if her sons could sit next to Jesus when he came into his kingdom, Jesus replied: *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."* Matt 20:25-28

It's hard to imagine, but James did Jesus one better. Not only are we to care for the poor and so fulfill the royal Law, if we do not it is proof positive that our faith is dead. We used to say that just because you sit in a garage, that doesn't make you are car; James says just because you sit in a church- if you do not help those whom God has given you to help, you are not much of a Christian.

Today is communion Sunday. Normally we talk about the Lord's Supper in terms reenacting the New Covenant. James would have us talk about how we *live* the New Covenant. As we reflect on the incredible gift of grace that we have been given, let us recommit ourselves to living out that grace as we extend it to others. Let us pray.