

God is partial

By [Thomas G. Long](#)

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This little scene in which James takes us into a worship service for a lesson on favoritism is perhaps the epistle's best-known passage. The imagery is crisp and irresistible, the moral lesson so chronically needed. A worshiper who arrives in minks and gold rings is promptly ushered to a choice pew, but a poor person who shows up in rags is relegated to the bleachers. If a congregation shows partiality like that, James [warns](#), "you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

Years ago, a friend of mine decided to put this passage to the test. A well-respected leader in her congregation, she chose to appear at church one Sunday in the guise of a homeless person. (This was in a time when the presence of the homeless in worship, even in urban congregations, was less common than it is now.) Now my friend is by no means a "minks and gold rings" kind of woman, but it nevertheless took a great deal of effort, theatrical makeup and thrift-store clothing to transform her into a person whose appearance showed the ravages of the streets.

Her experience at church was remarkable, transforming. Church friends who would normally have greeted her cheerily in the hallway turned their heads and would not make eye contact. When she was not being ignored, she was glared at, and, as she made her way toward the worship space, she could sense the ushers tensing for a possible confrontation. They seated her as far way from others as possible.

There was an anxious moment when my friend stood up to speak during the joys and concerns. When she revealed who she was, this turned rapidly to astonishment, then embarrassment, and finally to many apologies after the service. As James says, this kind of partiality is sin, pure and simple.

But even the good lesson learned by my friend's congregation is not nearly as radical as the passage in James. In a well-educated, affluent, progressive congregation, this text is typically heard as a call to impartiality, to even-handedness. "What James is telling us," people will say to themselves, "is that we

should treat people fairly and equally—whether they are rich or poor, it should not make a difference. All people are equal in the sight of God.”

Nothing wrong with that, I suppose—even-handedness is a virtue. But James is talking about something more daring. Yes, he condemns partiality, but he is not really advocating for neutral impartiality; in fact, he is trying his best to get the church to display *partiality*, but of a different kind—the kind of partiality that God expresses. While the American image of justice is a blindfolded woman holding balance scales, the biblical image is instead a God who sees everything and sets things right. God is not impartial; God chooses the weak and establishes justice.

The church’s problem, as James [describes](#) it, is that the way it seats people for worship expresses the world’s form of partiality instead of God’s: where God has chosen the poor and dishonored the rich, the church has done the opposite. James indicates that fawning over the rich in worship is not only stupid but also a denial of the true wealth of baptism, in which the poor, the weak and the lowly are transformed into the royal children of God.

The church is called not to even-handedness but instead to let the light of Christ disclose genuine worth. James’s point is not to encourage the ushers to smile with equal warmth toward all who come to worship but instead to remind the church that in the economy of God’s grace, the very ones for whom the world has little regard have become the guests of honor in the household of God.

*Additional lectionary columns by Thomas Long appear in the August 25 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe. Long will also be giving the Century's [annual lecture](#) next month.*