

Can the Rich and the Poor Live Together in Peace?

Rich Nathan
September 10 & 11, 2016
Different Together
James 2:1-9

Robert Putnam has taught at Harvard for many years. He was the Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. He is an award-winning political scientist. And he grew up here in Ohio, up on Lake Erie in Port Clinton. He says that when he graduated high school back in 1959 there was an incredible amount of mixing of the wealthy and the poor in his high school and in Port Clinton as a whole.

Putnam wrote in his book, *Our Kids*, that you may have lived on different sides of the tracks. Your dad might have been a manual laborer. Someone else's father may have owned the local bank, but their kids went to the same high school and no one thought it strange when the son of a doctor was dating the daughter of a gas station attendant. Wealthy people and poor people attended the same churches in Port Clinton. Their kids played on the same sports teams. Teams that were paid for with tax dollars – there were no pay-to-play sports teams back in the 1950's. The kids all swam in the same city pool. They played in the same school orchestra. Again, there was no pay-to-play for taking music lessons.

Putnam says that his parents never voted against a school levy even when their kids graduated from school because they wanted to support "our kids". And by "our kids", they didn't mean their biological kids, they meant all the kids in the community. What Putnam points out in his book, *Our Kids*, and what the conservative Charles Murray points out in his book, *Coming Apart*, is that over the last 50 years, in virtually every measurable way, the bottom third and the top third in America have grown more and more distant. If you take the top third in America marked by those with a college degree, and the bottom third – those marked with a high school diploma or less – in the United States and you drew a graph from 1970 to today, virtually every single graph looks like a pair of scissors opening up.

So, for example, if you say: what's happening in America with children born out of wedlock? Concerning the top third, there's been barely any movement for 50 years concerning children born out of wedlock – very few children are born to unmarried women who have college degrees. Concerning the bottom third, it is skyrocketing.

If you ask about divorce, who's getting divorced in America? Concerning the top third, there's been almost no movement over the last 50 years. Concerning the bottom third, it is skyrocketing.

If you ask what's happening with childhood obesity? Or addiction to prescription drugs? Or overdoses? Or unemployment? Or incarceration? Or really almost any other social pathology, the graph looks the same.

Concerning the top third, there's been almost no movement over the last 50 years. Concerning the bottom third, things have gotten really bad.

Now, there's a variety of responses to why that is and how we should address it. I'm not going to get into all of that today. I would commend to your attention these two books, *Our Kids* and *Coming Apart*, if you want to read the spectrum of responses to these social trends.

Putnam has one particularly troubling statement in his book. He says very poignantly that in many ways, the most important decision that any child in America can make right now is the choice of their parents. Because depending on who your parents are, that will often determine where you live, what kinds of schools you go to, whether your parents are married, how you are disciplined, what your access will be to extra-curricular activities, what counsel and advice you will get about your future. In many ways, the America of the 21st century looks more and more like the Greco-Roman World that Jesus lived in in the first century.

In the Roman World, things were really stratified. Economic class was determined by one's birth. The very small upper class controlled the vast majority of the property, the wealth, the power, the status. They constituted less than 1% of the population. They sat in the best seats in the theater and at all public events. They received the largest tax breaks. They had the best representation in court. They were given more lenient sentences for convictions for the same crime.

But then Jesus came and he created something that was radically different than the Roman world of his day or even of America today. Jesus created the church. And this is how Jesus describes the church:

Matthew 5:14

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.

The church is made up of those who have committed themselves to follow Jesus as their Master and Lord. From the beginning, the church was designed to bring people together across racial lines, across generational lines, across political lines and across economic lines.

I started a series last week titled "Different Together" because it's really clear that America is fracturing along racial, generational, political and class lines. Is it possible for people to be brought together while retaining our unique identities? Can we be brought together in mutual respect and love for each other? I want to look at the issue

of class today in a message that I've titled, "Can the Rich and the Poor Live Together in Peace?"

Let's pray.

James 2:1-9

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

One of the great tragedies that has occurred in America today, and it's been the case in England for several generations, is that people who are economically struggling are no longer showing up in church. We hear so much in politics today about the declining economic fortunes of the working class, but there's almost no public discussion about the declining spiritual fortunes of the working class. And it's this spiritual disengagement from church that I believe is at the root of so many of the other pathologies that we're seeing growing in our country.

The church going rates of the upper third in our country and the lower third were almost identical in the 1950's, 60's and early 1970's. But over the last 40+ years, church-going in the United States has become increasingly a middle class affair in many, many churches. Those who are economically struggling are no longer showing up.

Sociologists tell us that church going improves the wellbeing of people in a multitude of ways. Those who go to church are physically healthier than those who don't. Those who go to church are psychologically healthier than those who don't. Those who go to church have more social support. They have a greater sense of meaning. They learn better relational skills. They are more engaged in the community. They are more likely to vote. They are better able to network for better jobs. Those who participate in

church generally have healthier marriages. They even have better sex lives. That's a great advertisement for church – come to Vineyard and your sex life will improve! It's absolutely the case that church is good for people in almost every measurable way! Even secular sociologists tell us that church is good for people. So, it's socially disastrous that in America now, the poor are dropping out of church.

James, which many people consider to be the first New Testament book ever written, tells us that there are things that a church can do to either include the poor in their midst or exclude them. Do you want to have a church that brings the poor and the wealthy together? James says that you have to keep yourselves from favoritism towards the wealthy. Here's what we read in verse 1:

James 2:1

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

What is James talking about by favoritism? He's talking about our sinful human tendency to communicate to some people "You don't belong. You're not part of our circle. You're not one of us. We don't want you here. We don't need you here. I don't have anything in common with you." He's talking about the little cliques that might exist in a church or in a small group where a few folks separate off together and communicate to others that they're not welcomed by the lovely people. He's talking about cliques in teen groups where certain kids are excluded because of their looks, because of their dress. You are not like me, therefore I don't need you in my life. James tells us right off the bat that

Favoritism contradicts our faith

Christian faith teaches us what God is like. Favoritism is contrary to God's own character. Here's what we read:

Deuteronomy 10:17

¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

Here's what we read:

Acts 10:34-36

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

Church leaders are especially charged to not show favoritism to anyone. So if you're a pastor or a small group leader or a youth ministry worker or a kids' ministry leader listen to the Apostle Paul's command to Timothy, who was a young church leader:

1 Timothy 5:21

²¹I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.

According to scripture, favoritism – preferring someone over another person because of their wealth or their position in the world – is a sin. It is opposed to the character of God. And it's opposed to the way that Jesus related to people.

But not only is favoritism a contradiction of our faith, it's a contradiction of our values.

Favoritism contradicts our values

Look at verses 2-4:

James 2:2-4

² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Back in the Old Testament, God calls the prophet Samuel to go to a man named Jesse and anoint one of his sons to be the new king over Israel. Samuel met the oldest son who was tall and handsome. He thought, "Surely, this must be the one that God has anointed to be King." Even spiritually mature people like Samuel, and like some of us, make distinctions between people based on externals, based upon their accents, their grammar, their dress, their professional degrees, the kind of cars they drive, the jobs they hold, the houses they live in. You know how God judges people? God judges people based on their hearts.

Slide 1 Samuel 16:7b

The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

Friends, do you ever pray, "Lord, help me to see what you see in this person? I only see their external appearance – how they look, how they speak, how they dress, how they act – but you see their heart. You see their capacity to love. You see their kindness. You see their faith. You see their orientation toward you and toward others. You see their humility, their loyalty, their goodness. You see, Lord. And you hear, Lord. You

hear their secret prayers, their words of encouragement, their tears. Help me to see what you see and hear what you hear.” Do you ever pray that way?

Before Jesus chose the twelve apostles, it says he spent all night praying. He didn’t want to choose 12 based upon their credentials or their charisma. It was more, “Lord, who do you have your hand on? You are the only one who sees the future, who are you picking? Who would pick Peter? Or James and John or Matthew the tax collector? Or really, any of the people that God picks in the Bible. Virtually all of them have failed at some point, but God looks at the heart. Friend, before you make an important decision – whether to make a job change, whether to go into business with someone, whether to date someone, much less marry them, whether to hire someone at your job, or promote someone in ministry – ask God to help you see what he sees and to hear what he hears. Never make a big decision without first praying for discernment, to get past the obvious, the external, the appearance.

James 1:5

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

Favoritism, preferring the wealthy over the poor, excluding the poor, it contradicts our faith, it contradicts our values.

Favoritism contradicts our experience

James 2:5-6

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?

James asks us, “What has your experience been with the beautiful people? You care so much about the opinions of the beautiful people and try so hard to impress them. You make sure that the beautiful people at work or at school think you’re intelligent. Tell me,” James would ask, “What was your experience with the most popular people in your high school? Would you say that the popular kids in school were always the nicest people? The most humble? The most generous in their compliments and their encouragements toward the weak? How did the most popular people treat the poorly dressed? The non-athletes? The obese? The clumsy?”

James is saying that these beautiful people are the very source of your problems. Why, Christian, do you care about the opinions of the wealthy and the beautiful? They, and people like them, are often exploiters. He asks, “Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?” Literally, the word exploit means to oppress, to dominate. There is one spiritual

being in the Bible who oppresses and rips people off and dominates them, and that's Satan.

One of the commentators said very wisely that to join sides with the oppressor, to stand with the lovely against the unlovely is to join sides with Satan against God. God hates oppression, he hates domination, he hates abuse. He hates it when people are beaten down and excluded. God always stands on the side of the underdog. God's heart always goes out to those who are being abused by the government, by the powerful, by the strong. Never ask which side is God on? He always takes the side of the underdog, the beaten down, the person who has nowhere else to look other than to God. Isn't God the one who chose the slave people for himself in choosing Israel? The cries of the sick, the poor, the prisoner, the refugee, the widow, the orphan always reach the heart of God.

And yet, James says, in spite of all of our experience and all of our experience of the way that the prosperous, the popular, the powerful relate – we still prefer the lovely people. How crazy is that? There's something else that favoritism does.

Favoritism contradicts our calling

James 2:8-9

8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

The specific command that James cites, "Love your neighbor as yourself" is a favorite of Jesus'. We read it six times in the Gospels. The Apostle Paul quotes this command, "Love your neighbor as yourself" in the book of Romans and in Galatians. This command is frequently seen in the Gospels and in the Epistles as summing up the law. But James' reason for citing it may go back to the book of Proverbs. Here's what we read:

Proverbs 14:21

It is a sin to despise one's neighbor,
but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy.

The poor person, the needy person, is according to the Proverbs, the neighbor that we're supposed to love. So, here's the logic that James is employing. When we show favoritism and separate ourselves from the poor, then we violate the continual call of scripture for us to love our neighbor and, therefore, we sin against God.

Why should we help the poor? I'm speaking to those of you who consider yourselves followers of Christ. I know not everyone who is listening right now considers

themselves to be a follower of Christ, but you can overhear what I'm saying to Christians. The reason we Christians should help the poor is

Because God identifies with the poor

Proverbs 19:17

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will reward them for what they have done.

What an extraordinary thought. That there is such a close identification of the God we worship with the plight of the poor, that when we give to the poor we are lending to the Lord. God who has no need of anything. God who owns everything. God who gives us the ability to make our money. This God who created us says, "I have so closely aligned myself with the poor that when you give to the poor, I am putting myself in your debt." That's an outrageous statement. It's a shocking statement. It's one that I would shrink back in saying, but God said it.

Why should we help the poor?

Because God won't hear our prayers if we don't help

Here's what Proverbs 21:13 says:

Proverbs 21:13

Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor
will also cry out and not be answered.

You know, there are a lot of Bible verses regarding why our prayers sometimes bounce off the ceiling and never reach God. We pray and we pray and we don't get answers and we say that something's wrong here. What's wrong? God says in the Bible, "Your prayers are being blocked." When we're at odds with our spouses and treat our spouses unkindly, the Bible says our prayers are blocked. When we live in sin and we deliberately reject God's way, the Bible says your prayers are blocked. And when we shut our eyes and close our ears to the cry of the poor, the Bible says your prayers are blocked. Lord, I want you to hear my prayers. God says, "Then will you be the answer to the prayers of the poor?"

Why should we help the poor?

Because we can't call ourselves Christians if we don't help.

James 2:14-17

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

In other words, scripture is saying that if we regularly refuse to help people in need then the genuineness of our faith is called into question. Faith is more than just saying “I believe”. It’s more than mere profession. It’s the actual possession of Christ in our hearts. And if Christ is in your heart then he will motivate you to help those who are in need.

Here’s the deal. We can’t care about people at a distance. Love is not something that you can practice from the safety of a gated community or a high rise office building that has armed guards. Love requires us to actually be in contact with people who we are trying to help. Contact with people who are different than us, as I said last week, breaks down our stereotypes. Contact in a helpful setting like the church breaks down our prejudices.

You know, we live in a time where our neighborhoods are segregated by rich and poor. Where our schools are often segregated by rich and poor. Where even our friendships are segregated by rich and poor. So, Jesus invented the church to be a counter-cultural force. An alternative community to do things differently than the world does them. The world is fracturing in a thousand ways, but Jesus invented the church to pull people together who are different. Jesus invented the church to be a city on a hill and a light of the world. And in a church like Vineyard Columbus, we actually are bringing rich and poor together in one church and in one place.

There are so many opportunities here to serve those in need. I just want to mention a few.

Can you drive? We need help driving our 15-passenger van to transport those who are homeless to the 9:00am service here at Cooper Road.

We do outreaches at homeless camps on Wednesday and Saturday evening.

We have two food pantries – one on Cleveland Ave., the other on 5th Avenue. Every Saturday morning, you can help bag and distribute groceries, carry bags, pray for our guests. Our food pantries on a Saturday morning are a great opportunity to serve together as families.

For any of those opportunities, contact:

Rhodie Shreve

Rhodie.shreve@vineyardcolumbus.org

614-259-5441

We have a free legal clinic here at our Community Center on Cooper Road. We need attorneys to volunteer, to offer assistance for those who can't afford an attorney.
Contact

Drew Campbell

dcampbell@bricker.com

At our Vineyard Free Health Clinics, we're always looking for dental professionals to volunteer – dentists, dental assistants, dental hygienists, dental sterilizers – to show the love of Jesus. We run the dental clinics every single night.

We need medical professionals – doctors, nurses, pharmacists, optometrists, chiropractors – to help. If you are a medical professional, you can contact:

Carol Achmoody

Carol.Achmoody@vineyardcolumbus.org

There are so many ways to connect and have contact in a church like this. Working with children and teens, working with women who are in crisis pregnancies, helping counsel someone who is struggling financially, working in prisons, teaching a class. Here at Cooper Road at the volunteer counter in the lobby we've got colored flyers listing various opportunities to have contact with the poor. These flyers are available at the information area at all of our campuses.

Why not wall ourselves off from those in need? Why not show favoritism to the well-off? Because favoritism contradicts our faith. Favoritism contradicts our values. Favoritism contradicts our experience. Favoritism contradicts our calling. And, finally,

Favoritism contradicts our need

In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul compares the church to the human body. Here's what he says,

1 Corinthians 12:21-23

²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty

It's easy to understand why a poor person needs a wealthy person – a poor person needs a wealthy person's money. They need the wealthy person's connections. They need the wealthy person's expertise. But why does a wealthy person need a poor person? Why does a have need a have-not in their lives? Why can't a wealthy person say, "I have no need of you?"

Let me tick off for you three reasons in closing why we want to build economically integrated churches. Not just churches for the wealthy over here and the poor over there. Why we really need to build a church that is Different Together. Why the wealthy really need the poor in our midst.

First, because

Only as the poor are included do we meet the Lord

Jesus says in

Matthew 25:35-36, 40

³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

We find ourselves struggling to connect with Jesus. We struggle to experience the presence of Jesus. Jesus said, "Whatever you do for the least of these, you do it for me." Get near to somebody who is in need and you'll get near to Jesus because that's where Jesus is. Do you want to know where Jesus is? He's at the food pantry. I was hungry, you gave me something to eat. He's at the community center. I was a stranger – in other words, Jesus says I was an immigrant, I was a refugee – and you welcomed me in. I almost never minister to somebody who is in need without getting a little backslash of Jesus' presence.

Why do the wealthy need the poor? Because

Only as the poor are included do we impact the world

There was an article this week in the *New York Times* which you know is a politically liberal, largely secular newspaper from New York, and the article was basically a celebration of Southern Baptist Christians in Alabama. Now, what got the *New York Times* to notice the kind of people that a Times reporter would usually ignore or disdain? From Alabama and they're Southern Baptist? The *Times* reporter said that

virtually the only people in America that are currently welcoming refugees are Evangelical Christians. These conservative Christians who believe their Bibles are getting the notice of the *Times*. Why? Because of their politics? No! Because of their protests? No! Because of their passion for the poor.

Follower of Christ, you want to impact the world that either ignores Christianity as irrelevant or disdains it as positively harmful? Do something for the poor. It's when we at Vineyard Columbus do something for the poor that the larger community says, that church is worth checking out!

Why do the wealthy need the poor?

Only as the poor are included do we understand the gospel

See, it's easy when you generally succeed in life to begin to believe that it's because of success that you are loved by God. Of course, God loves me. I work real hard. I try to do the right thing. I stayed married. I tried to help other people.

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest who gave up prestigious teaching posts at Notre Dame and Harvard to work as the pastor of a community in Canada that ministered to people with severe mental and physical disabilities. Nouwen said that he worked with a boy who did not appreciate and could not comprehend Nouwen's global fame. This boy wasn't impressed by Nouwen's many books or his incredible education, what he knew or where he taught or who he could quote. Through this boy, Nouwen discovered that God loved him just for him. It's when we get around people who couldn't care less what we know or what we've done that we get in touch with the truth that I am accepted by God for exactly the same reason that this poor person is accepted by God. Not because of what I've accomplished, but through my simple trust in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross for me.

I want to close by showing you an extraordinary video of two men who are part of this church.

Video

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Rich Nathan
September 10 & 11, 2016
Different Together
James 2:1-13

- I. Favoritism contradicts our faith
- II. Favoritism contradicts our values
- III. Favoritism contradicts our experience
- IV. Favoritism contradicts our calling
- V. Favoritism contradicts our need
 - A. Only as the poor are included do we meet the Lord
 - B. Only as the poor are included do we impact the world
 - C. Only as the poor are included do we understand the gospel