

## All Humans are equal in the eyes of God

First class seats are somewhat of an illusion. Oh, you can board the plane whenever you want. You get extra leg room. You get free drinks and better meals. The flight attendants act like they really want to serve you.

But you still have to get to the airport on time, check your unlocked bags, limit your carry-ons, go through the same security controls as people in coach, sit in the same waiting area, board when the staff is ready, hear the same emergency procedures, switch off your cell phone, keep your seatbelt fastened through turbulence, and deplane when the engines are shut down. In first class you land on the tarmac at precisely the same moment as the folks seated in the last row. It costs a lot more money to go first class - more than the “free” drinks and the meal. But people still pay it.

There is more equality in the world than meets the eye. Airlines give us the illusion of huge distinctions between rich and poor. They get people to pay a lot of money to foster that illusion. But whether you are in a plane or on the ground, whether you live in wealth or poverty, you have the same weather as your neighbor, you are susceptible to the same illnesses and accidents, and at the end you will die a similar death. Human beings are equal in the eyes of God.

This belief appeared in the Old Testament. Moses told the Israelites that God “is not partial and takes no bribe” (Deut. 10:17). It looks to the casual observer that God shows favor to those who are rich, those with fine clothes and great hair, those with the right schools and the pretty wedding. It looks to the casual observer that God abandons those who are poor, those who live in huts, who cannot afford shoes or schools or retirement, and who have never seen the inside of a plane.

So the Bible turns this partiality on its head. It says God is partial to those who do not prosper. “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you - for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you” (Deut. 7:7-8).

The theme appears in the New Testament also, where Christians claim to be the new chosen people. “You are a chosen race” (1 Peter 2:9). “[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). And, in next Sunday’s second reading (James 2:1-5), James poses this rhetorical question: “Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised those who love him?”

So, although James opens this paragraph with the admonition, “show no partiality,” he really means “show no partiality to the rich. If you show partiality, show it to the poor.” Being partial to the poor corrects our tendency to show partiality to the rich.

We are all tempted to coddle. We want the attention of the good-looking person more than the plain one. We fantasize about friendships with celebrities. We go into debt trying to appear wealthy - we buy things we

cannot afford to create the illusion of prosperity that is not there. Our deceptions increase our poverty.

Partiality is nothing new. James writes about two guests who appear at an assembly of Christians. It is not clear whether this assembly gathered for worship, study, arbitration or mission. Whatever the reason, two guests walk in looking for seats. One wears gold rings and fine clothes. He is given a seat. The other wears shabby clothes. This person (was it a woman?) is given a choice to stand or sit on the floor.

James tells the people to show no partiality to the rich because God chose those who were poor to inherit the kingdom. When Christians discriminate against the poor we violate our own values and cripple the justice of society.

When society creates the illusion of first class and coach, people become greedy. We long for material possessions, but our prosperity may draw us away from the simplicity of life that creates the most direct path toward God. James would have us grow rich in faith, rich in hospitality, and rich in charity, while growing poor by sharing our possessions and eliminating the partiality that keeps us from recognizing Christ in our neighbor.