

**The Jewish Christian Synagogue
(23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)****James 2:1-5—No Distinctions in the Synagogue**

¹ My brethren, *show no partiality* as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² *For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in,* ³ and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “*Have a seat here, please,*” while you say to the poor man, “*Stand there,*” or, “*Sit at my feet,*” ⁴ *have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?* ⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? (James 2:1-5)

1. Synagogue: “assembly”; literally, “synagogue” (Greek *synagoguē*) (2:2)
 - a. Pauline Churches: met in “houses” (Rom 16:5)
 - b. Jewish Christians: met in “synagogues” (James 2:2)
2. Distinctions in Liturgical Assembly:

Rich Believers

Gold Rings, Fine Clothing

Seated on Benches

Poor Believers

Shabby Clothing

Standing or Sitting on Floor

Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and *the best seats in the synagogues...* (Mark 12:38-39)

Lee Levine: [B]enches and columns... are among the most ubiquitous archaeological findings... Many, if not most synagogues apparently also had wooden benches or mats in addition to the fixed stone benches.¹

4. Earthly Poverty vs. Spiritual Riches: “poor in the world” vs. “rich in faith” (2:5)

The Living Tradition

Augustine: Another way to meet our listener in his need is to offer him a seat... In certain overseas churches [=Rome] there is a far more prudent practice: *not only are bishops seated to address the people, but seats are available for the people too.* Thus it can be avoided that a frailer person, worn out by standing, would be distracted from his highly salutary purpose or even forced to leave. (Augustine, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* 13,19; trans. Raymond Canning).

Augustine: Far from me is the notion that in your tabernacle, Lord, the rich should be more highly regarded than the poor, or the noble than the less well-born. You have chosen

¹ Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (2nd ed.; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 337.

the weak things of this world to put the strong to shame, and you have chosen things which are dishonorable, despised and of no account, in order to bring to nothing the things which are. (Augustine, *Confessions* 8.4.9; trans. in Gerald Bray, p. 22)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

1. Why is showing impartiality in church such a problem? Why does James devote so much attention to the question of who is seated (or standing) in the synagogue?

For Further Reading

1. Bede the Venerable. *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*. Translated by Dom David Hurst, OSB. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1985.
2. Kelly Anderson and Daniel Keating. *James, First, Second, and Third John*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2017.
3. Gerald Bray, ed. *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XI. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2000.