

DAY six  
James 2:1-4

In the early 1920's, a Norwegian man named Thorleif Schjelderup-Ebbe shared an observation he had with the world that he called, Hackliste. We now call his observation "the pecking order". He noticed that chickens, when put into groups, established who was the boss, and created an order of importance down to the "bottom chicken". This order that they put themselves in determined which chickens got the food, and who got how much of it. Thankfully, humans don't have feathers. So we can say with integrity that we're completely different. Last week we talked about a similar theme. The Kingdom of God is upside down in that people aren't rated and ranked by their achievements, accumulations and outward appearances like they are in the kingdoms of man. So, rather than go through this theme again (unless this is an issue for you...then perhaps you should revisit last Wednesday's thoughts!), let's pay special attention to the first verse. James says, My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. He attaches this value to belief in our "glorious Lord". There are quite a few reasons to refer to Jesus that way, and quite a few ways to explain and even experience his glory. But in context, it's key to understand that the reason we don't show favoritism is because our master didn't with us. Jesus doesn't see you as less precious because of anything you have done or neglected to do. So the command to not show favoritism is very important for as people interacting with each other, but the good news is the first line: I don't show favoritism because he didn't and doesn't with me.

Do you believe this is how you're seen by Christ?

Or do you assume you have to sit on the floor of lowly shame because of all you fail to be?

What a game-changing truth: you are not different in worth or significance from those that speak original Bible languages, never got divorced, were virgins as long as they were supposed to be, have their retirement and education funds worked out already for their kids, have fresh paint on the walls of their beautiful homes, remember to pray even after meals, never say words more edgy than "heck" and walk around with a smile on their face everyday. One of the most beautiful realities tucked within this passage is that neither James nor anyone else would have the right to tell us not to play favorites if Jesus himself looks at outward behaviors or presentation to determine worth?

Don't show favoritism, because God, in whose image we are made, never does either.

Understand, today, that you have the same access to God through Christ as the Pope, a preacher, an innocent child and a saint on her deathbed. Whether you have ever heard that or not, and whether living that tuned into The Spirit is easy or hard, it's true.

So, as you reflect, and pray and live out the kingdom to the best of your understanding today- you do so with the same access to the loving Spirit of the Creator of the Cosmos as any spiritual giant you have ever decided was better than you.

Be encouraged that you are loved no matter what. And then, as James writes in these brief verses, pass that impartial love on to anyone the world has placed into the pecking orders of man.

"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" - 1 Timothy 2:5

from Jim

DAY seven  
James 2:5-7

Have you ever gotten the sense that you're supposed to believe rich people are bad and poor people are good? \\  
Some of us have heard hints of that or outright stated at church. Some of us feel like the Bible, and verses like today's, make the point loud and clear. As a result, we're left thinking that to take the faith seriously is to sell it all and become an ascetic for Jesus.

Bear in mind as you read that James, speaking as family and not detached judge, is trying to help steer his brothers and sisters away from a very specific phenomenon. And the phenomenon is simply this: they continue to gravitate to simplistic, cultural definitions of power and influence. They want to be like the rich kids, and they want the rich kids to want to play with them. In their defense, who can blame them? They want to align themselves with comforts. With influence. With some notion that their life is connected to what's "going on" and won't always be an uphill battle. But as they do, they slight and neglect the poor, push them into the margins of their communities so they won't be in the way of progress and, in doing so, slowly unbind themselves from God. A God that very clearly doesn't overpower the world like so many of Empires of history, but "underpowers" it with relentless, bottom-up, sacrificial love.

Had they already forgotten that Christ is a foot-washer, and not a tyrant? That he dined with people, not simply lobbied for them. Had they already forgotten that Jesus attached himself to the outcasts to catalyze world-change, rather than attending all the most lavish parties to make sure he was in with the movers and shakers? Had they forgotten that Jesus himself had no possessions to speak of, and food that others might not appreciate since it wasn't something you'd find at a buffet? (John 4:31-34)

The gravitational pull for human beings is always to ease and power. And in contrast, guilt is often the answer from religion toward those that claim faith and yet own or enjoy anything nice. But being rich or poor isn't actually the point. The point is our always wanting to align with power that isn't actually power. Jesus' simplicity, and his advocacy for those with no voice, resources or choices is a reflection of his heart, and his desire to show us that the old way of buying power are subservient to a life that gives itself.

What do you yearn for today? For what do you strive? Would it matter in another culture or time, or is it transcendent? Would it hold weight if the world suddenly changed and the rat race ended, or is it rooted in something deeper than an era's interests and priorities.

How can you re-see your family, your job, your education, your moment-to-moment life in light of Jesus' insistence that power of an eternal quality comes from a humble striving for love?

from Jim

## DAY eight

### James 2:8

It's not hard to imagine this sentence coming after the ones before it. James draws their minds back to the center: Remember guys, this whole thing rests on one command, loving others, ALL others, like we want ourselves to be loved. You wouldn't feel loved if you were made to feel loved based on conditions pertaining to your income, education or status. So make sure you don't love others that way.

Interestingly, when Jesus summarized the Law and Prophets, he actually said that the first command is loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Then, the second part is like the first- loving your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:34-40). But after time, the followers of Jesus stopped quoting the first part (Romans 13:9, Romans 13:10, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8, 1 John 4:12). There are 613 commands in what we now refer to as the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible. Jesus boiled all of that down to just two. Did they really believe that his summary was still too wordy and in need of being trimmed more? Maybe the answer to that is found in what happens if you attempt loving God and not people? John put it this way:

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen (1 John 4:20 NIV)

This, we see all the time. People claiming to be a faithful adherent to the one true religion, going so far as to say they have a relationship with the risen Christ, and yet are found to be less than loving to the other human beings around them. By no means is this a knock on a follower's imperfection. No one is perfect and that's understood. But perfection isn't what people are looking for from those that follow Christ.

Love is.

And claiming to love God while treating people poorly is a contradiction in terms that people inside and outside the faith can detect instantly. Perhaps, as a result of this millennia-old realization, they determined that the law is most fully summed up in the second part, loving your neighbor as yourself, and not just the first.

Consider this centrally important fact; Loving God while not loving people is not, it turns out, loving God at all. But loving people is the primary way God receives love.

Take the idea further...

If you are told that you are loved by God, and yet not loved by those that follow him, you will come to disbelieve in God's love. So, the love of people is the most powerful way we experience God's love.

Why is it important to consider this?

Because today you have the opportunity to worship the God of the universe and to know with humble certainty that you are in accord with his will. How?

Love.

Love those that are chronically neglected, ignored or even a source of repelling annoyance. Love those others walk by. Drive by. Roll their eyes at. Don't notice.

Love those you have long competed with...if even bitterly. Love those you're waiting to hear apologies from.

Love those that are seemingly rude by nature. Love those that you disagree with. Love those that cost you. Love those that are nothing like you, or don't like you.

This is how we worship the God of Love, and know that he loves us:

We find ways to love each other.

from Jim

DAY nine  
James 2:9-13

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

That's either great news. Or it's terrible news.

Great for those of us choosing to live in the ways of mercy. Terrible for those of us that choose to live, and force others to live, in the ways of judgment. This is another place where James rips off our older Brother, Jesus. Years earlier, he had said in the Sermon on the Mount,

"...Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:11-15 NIV)

Ouch. In another place, Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus told a parable about an unmerciful servant that received forgiveness (mercy) and yet failed to pay forward this same mercy to someone indebted to him. The story illustrates this same very heavy point: You cannot drink mercy and throw up judgment. You have to choose which world you're going to live in; one where you live and give grace and mercy as an undeserving citizen of the Kingdom of love, or one where you refuse to give mercy, or get it, because you're committed to people getting what they deserve. So James says to his family that we shouldn't rate ourselves based on how much or how badly we've sinned, because it only takes one sin to be categorized "sinner". So, instead of trying to figure out how you rate against a Hitler or Mother Teresa, live instead as those who will be judged according to the law of Christ. The law of sacrificial love that grants freedom from the never satisfied, equivalency-based, tit-for-tat law of reward and punishment. What has been freely received to undeserving recipients...us...is to be freely given as well. This is the world we want to live in. That we need to live in. The world (Kingdom!) where mercy triumphs over judgment.

Are there people from whom you have withheld forgiveness and grace and mercy? Sit and think through this. Old acquaintances from back in school that you still fantasize about getting even with....Co-workers that get the attention and praise that you earned.....a family member that hurt you...or is hurting you....

Perhaps trusting the person isn't yet possible because they aren't trustworthy. But can you at least cancel the debt? Ask these questions in prayer today. And then be courageous enough to do what God says.

from Jim

DAY ten  
James 2:14-26

“...a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone....faith without works is dead...”

Jim...This is heavy stuff, brother.

Yet, it's incredibly refreshing. Refreshing because, for many of us, our biggest fear is that Christianity is just another belief system. And in a world where belief systems are like pants (everybody has a pair!), it's often hard to take Christianity's claims of exclusivity seriously. But, James tells us something that Jesus made plain with his life: this isn't another mere belief system, but a way. In fact, Christianity was referred to as “The Way” 9 times in the book of Acts because it was/is so much more than a collection of things to know. It was a measurable way of living with measurable results.

When someone says “what difference does it make what you believe?”, how should we answer? If Jesus is just one more thing to have a sincere belief in, so what? People sincerely believe all kinds of things. But if following Jesus is a life-altering (as in alters the way we spend our days) surrender to another Way, then the question is answered not in conversation or even coercion, but observation. In participation.

In other words, our faith's life is found in it being lived out in a world that needs love, redemption, resurrection and renewal. A world that needs Jesus' body, not just his bio.

Perhaps you have felt yourself come to life as you have lived out the ways of love. Perhaps you have been generous with your time and interests, or you have enjoyed pouring into someone else's life to enhance it. It sparked something in you deeply and you recognize that it was holy. Perhaps you haven't had this experience and have wondered what point yet another group of "faithful" can make to the world that you can actually get behind? You want to know if faith is dead or alive?

You get to choose. Beyond only conceptually believing, and actually living in the flow of it, you get to choose whether faith is living or dead today. Prayerfully consider how your day may unfold, and think about how living the kingdom out, rather than merely knowing about the kingdom, might make the world come a little more to life.

“Little folks are fond of talking about what great folks do.” German Proverb

from Jim