



## TWO GUYS WALK INTO A CHURCH...

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We're making progress in our trek through the book of James. We're now in our third week, and we're moving into the second chapter. Many of you have been trying our experiment with the worksheets, and I hope you're finding them helpful. There's another new one this week. We'll continue to leave them on our web site ([www.newdaynw.com](http://www.newdaynw.com)) after this study is over, so if you want to try them later you can. We'll probably do more of these for other studies in the future, so if you have any feedback on how they're working or things that would be helpful to include next time, let me know.

To recap where we've been so far, we first talked about what James has to say about going through difficult times and how to find joy in the middle of them. Last week we looked at anger and its alternatives. James encouraged us to slow down our anger reflex and instead focus on cultivating compassion and our own purity.

It's all very practical, down to earth stuff. It's interesting: I've received more comments about how applicable this message series is than I ever have before, more people saying, "That was just what I needed to hear." And honestly, it's not because I've changed my preaching. It's just because everything James talks about is so relatable and so easy to identify with our own circumstances.

He does it again for us this morning in chapter two:

### **James 2:1-13**

*My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.*

*Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 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," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

*Listen, my dear brothers: 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? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?*

*If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.*

*Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.*

*Mercy triumphs over judgment!*

The way James starts out sounds like it could make the beginning of a good joke: These two guys walk into a church, one rich, one poor. But James is not in a joking mood. He's pretty worked up about this topic of showing favoritism. In fact, it stands out, because James has been bouncing all around like a pinball machine, shooting from one topic to another in rapid succession.

Then suddenly he devotes this long section to the topic of favoritism, which tells you that he must have been quite serious about it. Something was happening in the churches that seemed to be widespread. We pointed out before that James isn't writing to one congregation – he's writing to churches all over the place. So he must have noticed a trend that disturbed him and prompted him to spend some time addressing it at length.

Yet for as much space as he devotes to it, as important as it was to James, it doesn't seem to be a topic we think about much today. I can't recall ever hearing a sermon on favoritism. It's not a word we even use in every day language.

But that's not to say it doesn't happen. Because it happens all the time. Some parents play favorites with their kids. I knew a guy in college who grew up in a home where his mom and dad continually showed an unfair partiality to his sister. Maybe it was because she was a girl or maybe it was for some other reason, but there was no question that they doted on her and gave her way more attention than him. We visited his home once, and there were pictures everywhere of his sister, and none of him.

We might think the hypothetical scenario James paints is a little far fetched, with the people being so nice to the well dressed man and so mean to the poor guy. But as much more sophisticated and politically correct as we like to think we are in more modern times, we're still just as swayed by appearances as people were 2,000 years ago.

Even in churches, it can still happen pretty much as James described, where one person is included and another person excluded. Most of the time we don't even notice that we're acting that way. Kennon Callahan, who is an author and church consultant, says this:

*Across the years, I have frequently asked congregations what one thing they like best about their church. Again and again the answer is, "We are a friendly group of people." Note: Virtually all congregations are friendly groups of people.*

*By definition the only people who are not at church are the people who did not find us friendly. They are somewhere else...Try to see your service of worship through the eyes of a first-time worshiper, and then consider what they see.*

We gravitate to certain people and not others. It's prevalent all through society. Studies show that good looking students get better grades, good looking patients get better care from their doctors, and even good looking criminals get lighter sentences.

It isn't always about looks either. Height apparently creates the same effect, causing people to play favorites. The University of Pittsburgh found that their tallest graduates earned 12% higher starting salaries than their shortest graduates. Another study found that for every inch more in height, you can expect to earn \$789 more a year! Do you hear this, my fellow short comrades? To quote James, "my brothers, these things ought not to be!"

We all fall into the same trap from time to time, being selectively friendly. Favoritism shows up everywhere, in many different forms. But what does it really mean? Where does that come from? How serious is it?

That's what we want to explore this morning. What is James really getting at and why is it so important to him? He starts off by saying that

**Favoritism shifts our focus.**

He hints at it in the opening line of chapter 2:

*My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.*

James is known for having a really good writing style. If we were grading New Testament writers on their grammar and vocabulary, James would be at the top of the list, because he writes like a well-educated person. He shows a certain flair in his command of the language. But in chapter 2, he writes in this word "glorious" in a way that seems out of character. It doesn't flow the way his sentences normally do. It jumps out as grammatically awkward in the Greek and translators have had a tough time working with it. If you translated it exactly, it would sound something like "our Lord Jesus Christ the Glory" or "of the Glory." The smooth style suddenly is interrupted.

Now why would somebody who is such a good writer change things up that way? James is too good for it to be a mistake, so you have to think he did this intentionally. He worded this in a strange way because he wanted to draw attention to the glory of Jesus. He wanted us to trip over it. He made it stand out on purpose in this talk on favoritism.

For James, the reason favoritism is fundamentally wrong is that it shifts our focus from the glory of Jesus. There are two ideas wrapped up in this:

***1. We substitute little glory for big glory.***

C.S. Lewis makes a great analogy of a child in the city who is making mud pies. You offer that child a trip to the ocean, where they can build real sandcastles. But they've never been there, and all they know is the mud pies, and they don't want to give that up. So they stay where they are, content but missing out on what could have been.

When we show favoritism to people who impress us, it's like making mud pies. We're being satisfied with just a little bit of glory, and we're missing seeing Christ's big glory. If we truly understood how awesome and powerful Jesus is, we wouldn't be nearly as starstruck by the little bit of glory and power some people have here on earth. Even the wealthiest, most famous person in the world has nothing compared to Jesus. When we're totally in awe of someone's money and status, it becomes a form of idolatry because our focus has shifted away from Christ's glory. Favoritism becomes a false worship. We lift up somebody else in the way we should reserve for the Lord of glory.

We also lose focus on what Jesus did with his glory, which is the second part to James' argument.

***2. Jesus gave up glory for the unfavorites.***

**2 Corinthians 8:9**

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor...*

When he became human, Jesus stepped in the opposite direction of the kind of favoritism James is criticizing. The King of Glory chose to be born into very humble surroundings and to live his life among ordinary people. James knew this all too well, having grown up in the same home. God's Son may have had to share a bedroom and clothes and toys with James. And when James fully realized who Jesus was, it had to have been staggering to James to think about how far from glory Jesus was willing to go.

So favoritism is out of character for Jesus. We can't be partial when we say we are devoted to the Lord of Glory, because it is so far from what he is all about. Favoritism shifts our focus to impressive people instead of Christ. Secondly, James says that

**Favoritism shows what's inside us.**

*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," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

Normally, when you get into a discussion about discrimination, the focus is on how it affects the people who are being discriminated against -- how their rights are violated and how they are hurt by the attitude. James starts from a completely different spot. Although he's concerned about the effect favoritism is having on the poor, he starts out by saying that the real issue is what it reveals about us. There's a dark spot in our hearts that shows up when we pre-judge someone. Our true nature is revealed, and it isn't pretty.

Bob Dylan and Joan Baez became a pair back in the 1960s. Their names will always be associated together. But when they first met, Bob didn't even want to hear her sing. Later, he wrote a very honest assessment of the bias he had against her initially:

*A girl I met on common ground  
Who like me strummed lonesome tunes  
With a "lovely voice" so I first heard  
"A thing of beauty" people said  
"Wondrous sounds" writers wrote  
"I hate that kind a sound" said I  
"The only beauty's ugly, man  
The crackin' shakin' breakin' sounds 're  
The only beauty I understand.*

Bob Dylan had this kind of smug attitude that said pretty music was for shallow people. It wasn't real music if it didn't have an edge. And that perspective prevented him from appreciating a beautiful voice. Eventually he did listen to Joan sing, and here's how he describes what happened:

*When all at once the silent air  
Split open from her soundin' voice  
Without no warnin' from her lips  
An' by instinct my blood reversed  
And I shook and started reachin' for  
That wall that was supposed to fall  
But my restin' nerves weren't restless now  
And this time they wouldn't jump.  
"Let her voice ring out," they cried  
"We're too tired t' stop 'er sing"  
Which shattered all the rules I owned  
An' left me puzzled without no choice  
'Cept t' listen t' her voice.*

It shattered all the rules he owned. Through that experience, Bob Dylan learned something about himself, that there was a darkness in his own heart and personality. It had nothing to do with Joan – it was all about the prejudices he held without knowing it.

Do you find that you do the same thing – refusing to give people the time of day for random reasons? Favoritism takes so many unexpected forms. I attended a funeral recently that was held in a small, old church. It smelled like a building that should have been given to Goodwill – that musty, mildewy, old clothes smell. It instantly took me back to the church I grew up in. And as I sat there, I started to check out mentally. I wrote off the pastor as being insincere. I wrote off the music as being archaic. I wrote off the congregation as being stuck in the past.

James was talking to churches about accepting a visitor, but I was the visitor who wasn't accepting the church. I'm sorry to say that I formed opinions about people that I don't even know, people that I will never see again. James' words hit home to me: "You're discriminating among yourselves. You've become a judge with evil thoughts. You're deciding people's value and worth without having any of the facts." I was setting myself up in God's place, and I had determined that these people who matter to him didn't matter to me.

It's not fun to see that in yourself. Who do you write off? Who do you dismiss as not worth your time or attention? James says it shows more about you than it does about them.

First, it shows that we have a desire inside to think we're better than somebody else. James tells the churches they were "discriminating among themselves." Since it was among themselves, that means that in James' view, the people being discriminated against were part of the same group. So any separating that was going on was artificial. But in our minds, we like to create ways to divide people off and exclude them from the group, because that means they're not quite as good as us. They didn't make the cut and we did.

Secondly, he says that showing favoritism turns us into judges with evil or bad thoughts. Our logic is lousy. If the ways we divide people up are artificial, that means our intentions aren't as pure as we'd like to think. We're not impartial and we're not being fair.

So the criteria you use to evaluate people is very telling. The rules you follow for who you accept or reject show what's really in your heart. We're just like Bob Dylan (sort of). We need to see our rules shattered.

I think the line that is at the very center of what James wants to say is this:

*Listen, my dear brothers: 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?*

Here's the thing: Favoritism withholds love and concern from the very people God intended it for. That's because

**Favoritism shrinks the gospel.**

20/20 recently did a report on foreign aid to Africa. The U.S. sends millions of dollars worth of food to Africa each year to help different countries cope with famine and starvation. But the governments and politicians there are so corrupt, that many times instead of distributing the food, they sell it for profit. Much of the food never reaches the people who were supposed to receive it. It's a travesty: These massive amounts of life saving resources only help a fraction of the people they could.

That's what favoritism does to the gospel. God has sent massive amounts of salvation to the world in Jesus. When we start to limit who we show favor to, when we start to exclude people, we're corrupting the message Jesus died on the cross to bring. We're shrinking it. We are changing the nature of the gospel and preventing it from reaching the people God intended it for.

In a church setting, that turns church into a club, where we say, "You're in" to some people and "You're out" to others. We'd never say that in words, but by our actions, we're telling people, "You're not good enough for Jesus."

The very premise behind the message of Jesus is that it is for everyone – especially the people we think least deserve it. That's what Jesus was criticized for when he was on earth.

#### **Luke 5:30-32**

*But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

*Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*

The gospel is so big and wide. Jesus throws his invitation open to the world. Whoever wants to can come to him. There are no limits and there are no barriers to who is included in his love. As his followers, we have the opportunity and the obligation to demonstrate that. We need to break past our natural ideas of who is or isn't our favorite. Anything else is less than the true gospel.

When we can do that, we find that

#### **Favoritism shrivels up next to grace.**

*If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right... Mercy triumphs over judgment!*

Mercy triumphs over judgment. Each of those words carries a world of meaning.

Mercy here means kindness, but more than that. It's a kindness shown toward somebody in a tough spot. It's compassion for somebody's plight, with a desire to do something about it.

Everybody who comes into our lives has some sort of plight. Everyone is searching and in need of something. Mercy looks for what the need is, whether it is a need for money or food or a friend or a place to belong or forgiveness. Mercy wants to see that need and help. When you encounter people, are you viewing them with eyes of mercy, looking past the front they put up to see where their real need is?

The other option is that judgment word James uses. It actually means separation or selection. It is judging not in the sense of seeking justice, but judging in the sense of choosing between people. Sizing them up and putting them in categories. It's a critical spirit, always looking for ways to divide people up.

James says mercy triumphs over judgment. The kindness card trumps criticism every time. The word for "triumphs over" means rejoices against. There is a little victory dance in it. Mercy takes great joy in being the superior option, being the stronger choice. It's not a little better to have mercy – it's WAY better.

As people of mercy, we will become people whose first instinct is to see someone's need and seek to meet it.

In the movie *Ironweed*, Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep played these two broken down characters. They're walking outside in the cold when they come across this old Eskimo woman who passed out in the snow. Jack and Meryl have been drinking themselves, but they look at the woman and discuss what they should do.

Jack asks, "Is she drunk or a bum?"

Meryl recognizes her and answers, "Just a bum. Been one all her life."

"And before that?"

Meryl says, "She was a whore in Alaska."

"She hasn't been a whore all her life. Before that?"

"I dunno. Just a little kid, I guess."

And Jack says, "Well, a little kid's something. It's not a bum and it's not a whore. It's something. Let's take her in."

Here they are looking at an individual who had no worth to society, nothing to contribute, and they are able to look past the labels she's carried for years to see the person beyond it, to see a little kid. They saw her with the eyes of mercy

Mercy triumphs over judgment. That's the way to be the church. That's the way to deal with favoritism. It will shrivel up and die when we can learn to see each other through eyes of grace, realizing that we're no better than anybody else.

Maybe the reason we're so quick to move away from showing mercy is because we're needing to experience it in a fresh way from God again for ourselves, to remember that great, great love of the Lord that we sang about this morning.

D.L. Moody, who was a preacher back in the 1800s, said this:

*A great many think because they have been filled once, they are going to be full for all time after; but oh my friends, we are leaky vessels, and have to be kept right under the fountain all the time in order to keep full. Let us keep near him.*

Jesus said that people who have only been forgiven a little will only love a little. The more we have experienced his grace firsthand, the more in touch we are with our need for his mercy, the more ready we will be to share it with people.

Who do I dismiss? Maybe it's poor people like James is talking about. Maybe it's people with more money than me, who obviously must be too concerned about their wealth. Maybe it's other Christians who are so judgmental. Maybe it's people who seem shallow, or people of a different race, or people who can't speak the language or people who dress different or....Do I know who it is that I'm showing favoritism to or against?

What does that say about me? My preferences and biases reveal something about my heart and my own insecurities. What do I need to see about my own character flaws?

How am I viewing people? Through eyes that instantly criticize and categorize, or through eyes of mercy that see their need and rush to help?

Those are the eyes of Christ – eyes that look past the surface to my true need. Eyes that see me not as a label, but as a person. Eyes that see beyond my list of sins and annoying habits to that image of God that's stamped deep on every person. The Lord of Glory rushed to my help, accepting me and loving me when I had nothing to offer. He calls me, and he calls you, to go and do likewise.