

Marks of a Faith That Works

A Faith that Works... ***Shows no Favoritism*** James 2:1-13

Madison's Court Drama

Mom: (Yelling toward other room) Carl, Caitlin, you're going to be late for school.

[Mom is setting out breakfast foods]

Mom: (Yelling again) Hurry up. Your oatmeal is getting cold.

[Phone rings]

Mom: Hello. This is Helen. Yes, just a minute please.

[Teen boy enters and slumps into chair]

Mom: It's about time. Your oatmeal is turning to stone.

Carl: I thought that's how your oatmeal always is.

Mom: Very funny. Where's your sister? There's a phone call for her.

[Teen girl enters. Mom hands phone to her]

Caitlin: (Speaking into phone) Hello. (Brightening) Well, Hi Madison.

Carl: (speaking to mom) Madison? *Thee* Madison??

Mom: Yeah, I guess.

Carl: Why is she calling Caitlin?

Mom: Well, Caitlin is spending the night at Madison's and I suppose she wants to tell her what to bring.

Carl: (dreamily) Oh, Madison Miller is the most gorgeous woman in the world! I would live for her. I'd die for her. I'd kill for her.

Mom: I'm sure many boys have.

Carl: But I can't figure. What's the most popular girl in the school doing asking my sister to spend the night at her house?

Mom: Well, it's not just Caitlin. There's going to be several girls.

Carl: Can I go? (after laughter from congregation) Well, they might need protection.

Mom: Not a chance.

Caitlin: (ending phone conversation) Well that's just fine with me! [slams down receiver].

Carl: Wow, sounds like you're excited about going to Madison's.

Caitlin: Shut up. And pass me the brown sugar.

Mom: Well, you want to...

Caitlin: No.

Mom: You know, honey, it might help if you could...

Caitlin: I can handle it myself. I'm a big girl [as she spills the sugar]

- Carl: Yeah, I can see how you handle it.
- Caitlin: Nobody asked you to butt in, so butt out.
- Mom: Caitlin, that's no way to talk to your brother.
- Caitlin: I'm sorry, but I'm just so upset. It's now official. I am no longer a member of "Queen Madison's Court."
- Carl: I thought you were invited to spend the night.
- Caitlin: Well, now I have been officially "uninvited."
- Carl: How could she do that?
- Caitlin: By making a decision and dialing my number. At least she called me herself. I'll say that much for her.
- Carl: You are *ruined* at school. You are *trashed*.
- Caitlin: Oh, such comfort. Such compassion. I'm overwhelmed.
- Carl: I'm just trying to help you face reality.
- Caitlin: Well, let me give you reality. You're no help.
- Mom: But I don't understand. You two were getting to be such good friends. She's been in our home. You've even shopped together at Lloyd Center.
- Caitlin: Well, that was then and this in now. Who cares anyway?
- Carl: Right. Who cares.
- Caitlin: Who cares if the most popular girl at school blackballs you from her court? Who cares that all the guys think she's gorgeous and all the girls try to be like her and think like her. Who cares if everyone will do anything for her just for the favor of her smile. Who cares? Who cares?
- Carl: I do. I guess everyone cares except you.
- Caitlin: The crazy thing is that I do care what Madison thinks about me. I shouldn't, but I do.
- Mom: We still don't know why all this happened.
- Caitlin: A new girl, Belinda Thurgood, started into school this month.
- Carl: Oh, yeah, I know her. She's the ugly one with that one eye that kind of lays over to one side.
- Mom: Any more comments from you, young man, and you can wait for your ride outside.
- Caitlin: Carl's right. I mean, she's not attractive. She just started out at school recently. And everyone noticed her at first. They all made fun of her. When that got boring, all that was left to do was to ignore her. I never made fun of her—I really didn't. But I did my share of ignoring her. And to make matters worse, her locker is just two down from mine. And when I saw her standing so lonely there by her locker, I couldn't ignore her any longer.
- Mom: So what did you do?
- Caitlin: Well, Belinda turned around and saw me looking at her. It was like the Lord wanted me to speak to her. I asked her if she wanted to walk with me to the cafeteria. And when we got there, Madison motioned for me to come join her at her table, but there was only one seat. So I said I'd sit with Belinda where she usually sat by herself.
- Carl: I can imagine Madison was shocked.

Caitlin: Yeah, and then when I went to Algebra class after lunch, I got a note from Madison asking me if “I had become Belinda’s seeing-eye dog.” She can’t help the way she looks! Just because her eye droops off to one side. I can’t believe their cruelty.

Mom: People can be cruel.

Caitlin: Yeah. And after school I was talking to Belinda again. She’s really a neat girl. She’s kind and smart and interested in others. There’s so much inside her that she never gets to say. When she finally got to talk to someone, it all came gushing out.

Carl: I bet that was intense.

[Carl gets up and stuffs his mouth with one more fistful of food and heads out the door.]

Caitlin: I can’t believe we ignored her for so long just because of how she looked. But then Madison saw me with her again and I knew she wasn’t pleased and something would happen because I was befriending Belinda.

Mom: And that’s why Madison called?

Caitlin: Yep. I’m no longer a part of Queen Madison’s Court. I reached out to an outcast, and now I am one too.

Sermon Text

James is entirely and utterly practical. It speaks directly to where we live—whether it is a teenage girl struggling wanting to be a member of “Queen Madison’s Court” while finding herself to be an outcast, or we are a member of the Berachah Class wondering how we can be friendly to someone who is a newcomer instead of staying comfortably within our own circle. James is intensely practical in how we are welcomed and respected, and how we welcome and respect other people.

Don’t you wish Queen Madison were here to hear this message? Well, maybe she is. Maybe I’m Queen Madison, myself. James 2 is God’s Word to you. And as we read this passage I just want to share with you heart-to-heart from me to you through what God is saying to us all.

James 2:1-13.

Command

1 *“My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.”*

That’s the command. Then he turns to the second point of this passage, the example in verses 2-7.

Example

2 *“For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, 3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ and you say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,’*

(The passage does not say “sit down by my smelly feet, but that is the insinuation. The poor man gets to sit down at my footstool, on the floor next to my feet. But the rich man gets a chair of honor.)

4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? 5 Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? 7 Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?”

In verse one we have the Command. In verses 2-7 we have the Example. In verses 8 and 9 we have the Choices given to us for today. One choice is in verse 8 and one choice is in verse 9.

Choices

8 “If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,’ you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.”

The passage concludes in verses 10-13 with the excuse implied by us when we hear about being a transgressor of the law by showing personal favoritism.

Excuse

10 “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. 11 For He who said, ‘DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,’ also said, ‘DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”

We have run through this outline in reading the passage to get our bearings. Now, I want us to go back together to verse one and look more closely at the text.

Verse one is the Commandment that orders the whole passage. It begins with the words “my brethren.” This points out the fact the passage is directed to us—men and women—in the family of God, the Church. The hard words here against showing “personal favoritism,” which is rampant in the world, are not delivered for the world to obey. This directive is to us.

“Do not hold your faith in your glorious Lord Jesus Christ”—that faith that we have in him—do not hold that faith as compatible with showing favoritism.

The Greek word for “personal favoritism” is a Greek word formed when two words were pushed together, literally meaning “to receive + to the face.” It describes someone who receives or pays personal attention to someone just because of what they see on first impression. It is a word used

only four times in the NT, once here and three times elsewhere. Elsewhere it always it refers to what God the Father is NOT. He is not “a respecter of persons.”

It was hard for Samuel to get this message. Samuel was commissioned to ordain the next king of Israel. He knew from revelation that it was to be one of the sons of Jesse. One by one the sons of Jesse paraded in front of Samuel. A handsome group of boys they were. When he saw the firstborn, Eliab, he assumed Eliab was to be the one because he was so handsome, tall, strong—kingly. But God spoke to Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7, giving insight into how God sees people: “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

Aren't you glad that when the Lord looks at you right now, he is not distracted or impressed by the outward appearance? God is not one who makes his judgment on what he sees on the outside. God loves you and loves intently who you are really, inside. He loves despite the color of your skin, or how wrinkled it is with age. He loves you whether your body is shaped like a pear or shaped like a Michael Angelo marble sculpture. Whether you've had a hard life or an easy one. God looks through all that external stuff and loves you.

He asks us as his family, those James addresses as “my brethren,” to look at people the same way. That we would quit paying attention so much to the 1/16th inch of the skin that covers the body and much more attention to the depth of the soul that resides within each one of us!

“My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism.”

That is the command for us today. Next, he turns to an example in verses 2-7 to illustrate that command in verses 2-7.

The setting is of their church worship service. They have assembled to worship this God who is not a respecter of persons. And there comes into their service two strangers, seeking truth perhaps. We observe that one of them—from seeing his gold ring and fine clothes—is wealthy. The other—you can tell from his shabby appearance—is poor. Maybe he is from the Jerusalem Rescue Mission. How are they going to treat these two individuals.

Now in this home, most people stood or squatted or sat on the floor. But the rich man is escorted to the chair of honor while the poor man is directed to stand over in the corner or sit down next to your feet. In treating these two individuals differently because of what you can observe about their economic status, they had become “judges making distinctions among themselves” and in doing so they are judging “based upon evil motives.” The motives apparently are that they can get something more out of the rich man than they can get out of the poor man. “What if this rich man becomes a Christian? What if his wallet gets converted? Our budget problems are solved. Happy days are here again!” By making distinctions, they were thinking about what the man could do for them, instead of what they could do for both men.

Many churches have fallen into this same error. Many churches have elevated men to their elder board not because of their qualifications in First Timothy 3, but rather their money in First National

Bank. We need to come to the place of loving people because of what they can give, not what we can get.

In verses 5-7 James points out that it is ironic they would favor the rich man over the poor man because actually it is the poor who are often “rich in faith.” And it is the rich who often have been involved in dragging them off for persecution and martyrdom.

It is ironic that we might look with disdain upon the poor. Paul also points out generally speaking, the poor are the ones who are rich in faith in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS—not that they are wise and have a PhD, or are powerful as a senator, or rich that they have a bank account, but rather—BOAST IN THE LORD."

If God were writing to Central Bible Church today instead of to the “twelve tribes which were scattered abroad” in the First Century, what example would he use? For verses 2-7 is just an example of the command given in verse one. He could have used any number of examples.

He might say “Don’t honor the poor and despise the rich.” I can imagine here if a man drives us in a 2007 BMW wearing the latest fashion from Nordstrom’s and sporting a Rolex on his wrist, he may encounter an icy reception from some. Some might suspect he was materialistic. “I just feel more comfortable with my own friends here. I’ll let him find his own coffee.” I don’t know what example God would use if he were writing to us in particular.

Certainly, he might use racial examples. Racial issues are so troubling in our society. I struggle with racism. I was raised in a society and a town that had a lot of racial prejudices. I struggle to make my own heart totally color blind. God is helping me to do so. But our society is pent up with racial division, the society we live in. Even the reality program called Survivor this season has its four tribes divided up racially—the African Americans, the Caucasians, the Asians, and the Latinos. These tribes will be vying against one another on some remote island, and I imagine all the stereotypes will play themselves out throughout the season as Survivor plays the race card for better ratings.

As a Caucasian, I think I have a hard time really understanding what it would be like to be a black person in America. To have had my ancestors enslaved here. And not just the ancestors of the past, but in the present to be the object of institutional racism or personal prejudice. And I hate it.

As a Caucasian, I wonder how it would be to be Hispanic. When many of the calls for “Immigration Reform” are just political cover for racism. I long for us as the church—perhaps we can’t do so much as a society—but as a church, I long for us to be color neutral. To condemn

racism wherever it rears its head. Racism can, you know, come from any race toward any race. It can come from Whites toward Blacks; from Hispanics toward Asians; or Asians toward Whites.

One Sunday after church I was standing in line at North's Chuck Wagon at the salad bar, and I found myself next to an African American woman about 30 years old who was in front of me. She was wearing a sweat shirt that proclaimed "Grambling University...The Blacker the College, the Sweeter the Knowledge." Those of you who know me, know that usually I am not confrontational, especially in public, especially with strangers. But I sensed—maybe it was because I work in my own heart to love everyone equally—that I sensed I should say something to this woman, to root out racism wherever I find it. So I said, "Excuse me. But I want you to know I hate racial prejudice, especially when I find it in my own heart or among those of my own race. But I need to tell you I am offended in reading the words on your sweat shirt, "The Blacker the College, the Sweeter the Knowledge." Are you saying by that, "If one of my blond-haired daughters attended Grambling, it would pollute the college?" She looked down at her sweat shirt and then up at me. Then she replied, "The shirt was a gift. I can see where you would be offensive to you. I'll never wear it again." I was relieved she responded the way she did. I was especially thankful when I saw her take her salad and sit down at a table with her boyfriend, a young man who looked like he could play linebacker for the Seattle Seahawks.

Racism is terrible. I long, along with Dr. Martin Luther King, to live in a society (or at least a church) "where people will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

We have a long way to go. I do. I wonder what example James would use if he were writing to us specifically. Verse four says, "Have you not made distinctions among yourselves?"

[Object Lesson] You have made distinctions—saying one bucket is useful and one bucket is for refuse—and regarded some people to be discarded and others to be highly regarded. [Taking Fisher Price people one by one out of a hopper, sort them (with the help of the congregation) into one of two buckets: one representing usefulness and one representing refuse. Little people toys included: African American, babies who "just poop" without giving back much; hardhat blue color worker; sharp dresser; the face has been rubbed off to represent all people who are handicapped—amputated, drooping eyes, wheelchair bound; child; child; child; fireman (they're useful); medical worker; Hippie (braided flowers in the hair) which bucket should we put the Hippie in? Cowboy; School teacher (they get PERS).]

The very thing we have just done in this illustration—dividing up the little people according to their usefulness into two buckets—is the very thing God condemns through James 2, "making distinctions among yourselves." The bucket of usefulness that I like—that I enjoy being with, that contribute their skills or money to our church—as opposed to the refuse bucket to be ignored or even rejected.

Each one of us would have a different sorting into these two buckets. But what God is saying is that we should not have two buckets at all. [Poor the refuse bucket content of toy people into the useful bucket.] We should have just one, with everyone in it.

Verses 8 and 9 says there are two choices. That each person here as two choices.

The first choice is good. *“If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,’ you are doing well.*

The reason this choice is called the ‘royal law’ is because it is the law King Jesus gave us, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” When King Jesus gives an edict, that law becomes royal. Jesus quotes it from Leviticus 19:18 and made it the basis of his ethics.

When you come to church next week, how would you like to be treated? How would you like next week to be welcomed, escorted, attended to, loved, talked to, assimilated? However it is that you would like to be cared for, care for others in the same way. Treat everyone—the person in the wheel chair, the person from another race, the person from off the street—as you would want to be treated. In so doing, you are following the royal law.

But, in verse nine we have another choice: *But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors*

If you show partiality, you are committing...(say it) **sin.**

Some people would respond, “Yeah, it is sin. But it is an itsy bitsy one. It is not one of the biggies. It is not committing adultery. It is not murdering. And that response is at the base of the implied excuses addressed in verses 10-13: *“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one [itsy bitsy] point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, ‘DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,’ also said, ‘DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.”*

If you do not commit adultery and you do not commit murder, but you do show partiality, are you not a transgressor of the law? So that implied excuse that is just a little bitty sin is shot down. It is still sin to show partiality. We in the church seem to have our categories of the seriousness of various sins. He who commits murder would be sentenced to a life of being suspect. He who commits adultery would take years and years and years to recover his or her reputation, if ever. God does not seem to categorize sin so blatantly into the excusable and the inexcusable. In fact, when it comes to hurting the unity or the church, I suspect that someone committing adultery may not have as much impact against the forward movement of the church than someone who week after week after week showing partiality, disunity, gossip, unloving attitudes that are never dealt with. I’m not here to excuse adultery, but to point out showing partiality is also condemned as sinful.

“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Redwoods in Northern California are amazing living organisms. I am told that some of them soar 300’ high and have lived 2500 years. It is amazing to think these redwoods have been established into the earth since before Jesus walked on earth. Can you imagine how many storms they have endured—windstorms and snow storms. You might assume these huge trees must have roots that

go 300' deep into the ground to support their 300' canopy. But if you thought that, you would be in error. Their root system is actually very shallow. But God has caused them to grow in groves. And in the groves, the shallow roots link with each other so that one tree holds up its neighbor.

It's like the church should be. We in unity—no matter whether you are African American, or Hispanic, or Asian, or Caucasian, or American Indian, and no matter whether the IRS gives you a pass or comes after 50% of your income—it does not matter. You are a redwood growing in the grove of God here. I want to entwine my roots around yours so you can hold me up when the wind comes, and I want to entwine my roots around you so when life devastations of health and family happen to you, I am here for you too. God has made us to grow in groves. Today he calls that grove the Church.