

Time of Grace Ministry
The Healing of the Church: Love Your Neighbor As Yourself
February 5, 2012
James 2:1-12

When you fly, are you back with the cattle and the herd, back in economy class? Or have you ever flown first class?

I was at an airport a year or two ago, and I was standing in line to get onto the jetway to get onto the plane. And as I was nearing the gate there was an attendant there. She suddenly said, "Hello, Pastor Jeske!" It was somebody I knew; it was a friend. And she said, "Give me that," and she yanks the boarding pass out of my hand and I thought, "What? Give me that back; I need that! I can't get on the plane without it." And she said, "Be quiet." She came back a minute later and she gives me a different boarding pass; I didn't really get it, and I was going to argue, but then I looked down and it was a real low number. She had upgraded me to first class as a little personal perk.

Whoa, what a difference! Back in the cattle cars where they're three across – airplane seats today, just in case you don't know that, are designed for children. And I am a larger adult and so when I once plunk down in there, I can't move! When I am in a seat I am locked in and I actually overflow the seat on both sides; my shoulders overlap. If there's a guy who is the same size as me, we're kind of pressed against each other. It's very uncomfortable!

I was on a flight one time across to another part of the country and I was in the window seat and there was a guy in the middle who was even bigger than me, who just overflowed his seat. So I had to sit the whole flight like this. I had a crick in my neck for three days, but man – that first class was awesome! Great big roomy seats; I could slide around. Usually once I'm seated I'm down – but now I could stretch my legs! I could cross my legs in first class. Wow! And was the stewardess ever attentive! Came over about eight times to see if I had enough coffee. I was so caffeinated I sprinted off the plane; I was so supercharged with all the coffee.

Back in the cattle car you get a little bag of fifteen peanuts; about enough for one mouthful. The lead flight attendant in first class came up numerous times with a basket: "Help yourself; what can I get for you?" It was just awesome.

Another time a friend of mine said, "Hey, do you want to go to an NBA game?" and I said, "Well, I'm kind of busy." And he said, "It's through my bank. I could get you into the bank's luxury box." All of a sudden my schedule opened up and wow, is that another world, when you're used to the nosebleed seats. Have you ever been in a luxury box? It's like you're in a motel room – better yet, in a kind of a hotel – with one edge, one wall sliced off, and you can watch the game out there and you're sitting back there in these comfy seats. You could watch the game if you'd like or you can go back into the hotel room and watch it on TV if you get bored. And then after the game gets started these attendants come in and lay out a fabulous buffet, and then about three-quarters of the way into it they wheel in a dessert cart and there's a mini-bar and everything and man, do they just pamper you to death!

Well, clearly in today's marketplace, where businesses are selling experiences, they show favoritism. If you've got some money you will get pampered. Is that a good idea for the church? What would you think if your congregation had economy seats and first class? Would that be a good thing? What would you think if your congregation would, let's say, install luxury boxes where well-to-do people could lease a box and where there would be buffet service during the church service and where they would have a dessert cart and a mini-bar, and the wealthy could be sort of separated in a way from the hoi polloi – the regular people. Is that a good idea?

I hope you are saying, “No, I don't want to be anyplace like that!” and you'd be dead on. The Apostle James tells us about the dangers of favoritism within churches. Here's another one of my series called, “For the Healing of the Church,” and let's go to James 2 to see what the Lord, through James, has to tell us about favoritism in the church.

The mission of the church is to be welcoming. God uses you and me, sister, you and me, brother, as his human agents. We're his welcoming crew to let the world know how awesome it is to be a friend of God's once again – to be lost but now be found. To be an outcast, but now be loved. To be discarded once, but now to be welcomed in again. To be afraid you're going to hell, but now to feel like you're important. To be a slave of Satan, but then to be turned into a friend of Jesus is an awesome thing. And you and I are the sales agents; we're the reps. We're the boots on the ground – or whatever you happen to be wearing – the pumps on the ground, or stilettos on the ground, or whatever you happen to be wearing today. We are God's sales force to make him look good. But sometimes the dysfunctions of the church make God look bad, because we're so crabby. And one of the things that people can do to other people is make them feel that they don't belong. And there are plenty – there are millions – of Americans every Sunday morning who used to go to church, but they don't anymore because they were made to feel stupid, out of place, unwelcomed and unwanted by some people who claim to be Jesus' friends.

And I'm sure I've done that myself; I'm not wagging my finger because like every sin, the minute you start thinking that sins are something that somebody else does, you're into it up to your earlobes. And we need to look at this and think about it.

There are various ways that you can make people feel excluded, where one group seems to pull itself off as being superior and someone else as inferior. Maybe it's social class in economics, and in just a minute we're going to dig into the Apostle James in chapter 2 and talk about that one particular example. Where somebody rolls in and thinks, “Man, I don't belong here. I'm not dressed for this; I don't have the clothes to run with this posse. They're looking at me funny 'cause my clothes came from a thrift store; they did not come from someplace with fancy tags. I can't compete here. I feel like they're looking down at me. I don't belong in this class; I never made it out of high school, and these people talk smart here. I don't resonate; nobody's making me feel welcome. I don't fit here.”

Maybe it's racial. You know, when people get in packs where they outnumber somebody else, whoever is in the numeric majority has all kinds of ways to look down on, marginalize, and exclude people who are in the minority. Now, that could be racial or it could just be numerical. Usually when we talk about that type of excluding, when you say the word “minority,” it refers to people whose skin is one of various shades of brown or black. And first of all, I hate that

word because it comes from the Latin word, “Minor,” m-i-n-o-r, like minor, which means “lesser.” And I hope that no person who is of color ever thinks, “I am anything less than any other human being,” for God has designed you to be that exact shade and he thinks it’s so beautiful, he gave it to you for a lifetime; it’s not to diminish you. So let’s try to find other words to describe it, because minority always suggests somehow you’re something less.

But it could be the reverse. I went to a black Baptist church once, or maybe it was Pentecostal – can’t remember – and finally, one woman who was a kind of leadership type, I don’t know what she was – a head, elder, deacon or something, or whatever her roll was – but she had something about her. She had gold bars clipped to her coat and had some kind of rank and she came over and said, “Are you a politician?” She must have figured I was trolling for votes, like the only time white folks show up is when they want something, so she figured I wanted something. I said, “No, no, no. I just came – just a friendly visit – I just came here to worship. I hope that you have something for me today.” And she said, “Well, praise the Lord!” She’s shaking my hand and inviting all her friends over, and we had a little community around the white guy. And they came over and once I kind of cleared waivers, I was okay.

But you know, when we think about racial exclusion, our nation, of course, has this long horrible history of paler people excluding darker people, and that just is never going to go away. But you know, the reverse can happen too. It just depends on who’s in the majority. It so happens that there’s a racial imbalance – it would be nice if it was fifty fifty – but it isn’t. The school that our congregation supports is predominately African-American; ask any of the white kids, and they will tell you that very often they are marginalized. They get names called to them; they get put down and made to feel that they’re less important because they don’t fit in with the majority.

So this is just a human sinful dynamic where Satan is looking for an edge; some kind of way to make people feel excluded, or less important. And they’re so uncomfortable and not enjoying it, they withdraw – they leave – even though what’s being offered is of great value.

Even if the business world treats people differently and shows favoritism – shows a bit of elitism and treats people differently – the church must never do that. Whether it’s treating people differently for racial reasons or economic reasons or social class or the way you’re dressed, God wants his church to treat all people equally.

Here’s what James says. James, Jesus’ half brother – I’ve got to brace you for this – talks very bluntly. He does not have a smooth tongue; it’s sharp as a razor. He also is not speaking to people to explain to them how to become Christians. He’s talking to people who already know the Lord Jesus Christ, already have received forgiveness of their sins; they’ve been washed by baptism and are clothed in the robes of the holiness of Christ. And James now has written these five chapters to help people grow up and live out the implications of their faith in Christ. So these verses begin in chapter 2:

“My brothers,” fellow believers; he’s talking to people on the assumption they’re already Christians, and now they need to become more productive Christians. “You are 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...’”

Have a latte; can I bring you some snacks? “But say to the poor man, ‘You stand over there,’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet.’” Like, sorry buddy, we’re out of chairs. You’ve got to sit here on the floor.

“Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” All of us stand equally guilty before the throne of God, our racial differences irrelevant. Financial, social differences, what stratum of society we live in, what clothes we have, the ride we take around town – irrelevant before God. All of us stand guilty of sin; all of us are in need of the washing and cleansing. Everyone has equal value.

Verse 5: “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?”

In other words, God actually thinks everybody has an equal value, and they all have different important functions to play. It reminds me of the story of when St. Paul was gathering funds in Europe to help the people back in Jerusalem who were struggling and suffering. There had been a famine that was probably artificially induced as a Roman emperor’s punishment upon the rebellious attitude of the Jews. And to help relieve some of that suffering, St. Paul was gathering an offering for the people in Jerusalem who were poor.

Listen to what he says.

Here’s what he wrote, as he was gathering this offering, in 2 Corinthians 9: “Our desire in raising money from you is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed.” In other words, that all the giving is going in one direction so that, let’s say, if you’re a business guy in the Greek city of Corinth, and you’re contributing this money, it’s not all just going one way. You give money to these starving people in Jerusalem and now you have less and they have more. “No, no, no,” he says. “It’s a two-way street.” At the present, your plenty will supply what they need so that in turn, their plenty will supply what you need. It’s one of the ways God likes to work. He has a great, big heart for the stragglers and strugglers of the world. The God, your God – I hope it’s your God – my God – I know, the Bible’s God – I hope it’s your God – loves the poor in special and unusual ways, and he takes particular delight in lifting them up after they’ve been run over by the truck of life.

Jesus’ mom, upon finding out that she was going to be pregnant with the Son of God, in her Magnificat, uttered these principles that she had learned: “He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts; he has brought down rulers from their thrones. But he lifts up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but he sent the rich away empty.”

In his Sermon on the Mount, in the Beatitudes, over and over Jesus said, “Blessed are you when you’re suffering, when you struggle. Even when you’re poor and when you’re poor in spirit. When you are lowly, I’ve got you then right where I want you because then I can fill you up and lift you up.” That’s God’s backwards way of doing things. And unfortunately, we too often, including the church, get into the habit of falling into the ways of the world, which is to venerate money, love money, and suck up to people who have it, hoping that maybe they’ll shed a little of it in your direction.

That doesn't mean, be mean to people or insult people or means; it means to reaffirm your conviction in your organization, whether it's a school, or business, or especially a congregation, that in God's eyes all people have equal value and deserve to be treated with consideration and respect. All during the week, the rich can lord it over the poor, but on Sunday morning when you come to worship, we're all beggars, rotting and smelling of our evil within us. The rot that is in our heart, the in-your-face insults our heart churns out, pours out like a rotten stream, and says "No" to God. We all need to be convicted of the evil within us. We all need to be forgiven by that sweet blood of Jesus that he pours out on us – not because of our worth, but because of his mercy. And all of God's people have talents and skills that are useful to the work of the church. People who have been blessed with material possessions have a certain type of extra benefit they are able to bring with their contributions and with their connections; they can be of huge value to God's work.

But as Saint Paul just reminded us, God gets great things done through the poor as well. And the prayers of the poor are mighty in the throne room of God. James reminds you: "Isn't it the rich who are exploiting you? Aren't they the ones dragging you into court? Are not they the ones slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?" He's probably writing to Jews who are still living in greater Israel.

Where was hostility to Jesus Christ and the Christians centered? In the Pharisees, was it not? Who were the Pharisees, you ask? They were the upper level business people of that day. They were the rulers and leaders in the synagogues. They had money in the towns. They hated Christ more than anyone. So it was the people of wealth who persecuted the Christians.

He said, "Why are you sucking up to that? Their money makes them think they don't need a Savior." In Jerusalem, the Sadducees – the priestly clans – had all the money. When you had to rent a space for your animals to sell at sacrifice time, all those families got a cut out of those space rentals. When the money changers were there changing money from all over the empire, you better believe that the priests all got their cut. The priests enriched themselves because the priestly line had to be hereditary. They grew rich, and attaching themselves like barnacles around the hull of the temple in Jerusalem, they were sucking wealth out of it.

"Why do you suck up to people like that?" James is reminding them. Have you not been abused and hassled by the upper cast of society? Of course you have! "Think," he says. "Think! Look around you. If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right." That sums up the second half of the Ten Commandments. The first half is, "Love God with all your heart." The second half is, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Those two things gracefully, beautifully, and poetically sum up the will of God for the way in which you live your life. If churches become elitist and show favoritism, they are breaking a fundamental principle of God, and you and I should not just blame other people. We need to look at our own community here and take these words to heart and make sure that no one ever walks in these doors and is marginalized, pushed away, ignored, or made to feel small because you're outnumbered ethnically, because you get your clothes from a thrift store, or because you wear hand-me-downs or your kids wear hand-me-downs. Or there are holes in your kids' socks or a hole in their pants, or maybe you couldn't even afford pants and all they got is shorts. Every person has worth. Everyone is worth savoring – everyone. And you and I are part of that embrace of love; and elitism and favoritism? Destroy it! Let's drive it away.

“If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 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!”

So that’s sort of his summary statement. These are two motivations for you, and use whichever one works for you. If you need some law and anger motivation to get you out of a bad place into a good place – if that’s what you need right now – then let God kick you where you sit. He said, “Judgment without mercy will be shown to you if you refuse to show the same kindness and mercy that God did.” That gap between you and somebody that you might perceive downscale from you on the social ladder, that gap is so small compared to how big a gap it was between God and you – he stooped all the way down and made himself poor so that you through his poverty might become rich. How dare we withhold our approval and friendship from somebody that we might feel doesn’t fit like us or isn’t like us, in whatever way that might happen.

So have you gotten James’ message coming from God? Don’t show favoritism. No first class treatment for certain people and lower class treatment for others. Nobody is more or less valuable than anybody else.

Now, do you need motivation to make that happen in your personal life and to build that culture in your congregation? Well, we can do this hard or we can do this easy. If you need hard, here’s hard. James said, “Speak and act as though you 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.”

Boy, that’s just like Jesus saying at the end of teaching about the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” And then right away at the end of the Lord’s Prayer he said that if you do not forgive other people, your Heavenly Father will not forgive you. That’s called the law. It’s a pop right in the chops, isn’t it? And we need to hear that because as sinful people we need to take that whack; we need to get clobbered now and then to get our attention because we’re half deaf and we get distracted. That’s law preaching.

But the gospel is also a motivator, a better and more powerful and more lasting motivator, so we can do this easy also. If you are persuaded by this then let James tell you that mercy triumphs over judgment. Let God’s mercy to you be your inspiration to help to build a culture in your congregation where everybody is welcomed. Where you don’t just hang out in cliques, but that you make a point to look for people that God has sent. Perhaps it’s that woman off in the corner who’s been crying for the whole service because her life is such a mess. Or the teenagers who hang around in the bathrooms and the hallways and are reluctant to come in. Whoever it might be, you can help to create that culture of openness, love, and welcome without favoritism to all the people that God has sent to you to be connected with their Savior.

I’d like to pray with you today. Let’s pray to get rid of favoritism.

“Lord Jesus, help us to build a culture in our churches that affirms the value of everybody. Help us to treat all of your people all the same regardless of how expensive their clothes are or how

much income they have or whether they are white, black or brown, or old or young, or alone or with a huge family. Let us create a culture in which everyone is affirmed; where there is no elitism or favoritism. In Jesus' name, Amen.”

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mark Jeske, reminding you that every day is a time of grace for you.



Grace Notes

Guides for Personal Bible Study

The Healing of the Church: Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

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!

Points to Ponder

- Why is fawning over rich people such a problem for the church?
- Is it evil to desire to build your family's wealth? Defend your answer. (You might wish to consult Proverbs 10:4,22 and Proverbs 13:21 before committing yourself.)
- **Read Luke 1:46-55.** This is the Magnificat, the song of Mary. As Mary realizes she will be the mother of the Savior, what does she say God does with the rich and poor of the world?
- Have you ever been made to feel out of place in a church somewhere? If you have, describe the experience.
- Describe how the following situations can discourage sharing of the precious gospel of Christ: (a) when someone feels economically inferior, (b) when someone feels of an inferior social class, (c) when someone's ethnic group is in the minority, (d) when someone feels educationally inferior.

The Bottom Line

God wants us to build a culture in our churches that affirms the value of everybody, to treat all of his people the same regardless of how expensive their clothes are or how much income they have or whether they are white, black, or brown; old or young; or alone or with a huge family. God has shown love and mercy to us. That motivates us to show the same kind of love to those around us in order to avoid elitism or favoritism in our churches.

You can dig deeper into your Bible by reading more about these truths from the lesson:

- **God Shows No Favoritism!** John 1:12; John 6:40; Acts 10:43; Romans 1:16; Romans 10:13; Galatians 3:28
- **Be Merciful!** Proverbs 3:3; Matthew 5:7; Luke 6:36,37; Colossians 3:13
- **God's Love Motivates!** John 13:34; 1 Corinthians 13:1-8; Galatians 5:13; 1 John 3:16-18; 1 John 4:8

TIME OF
GRACE
WITH PASTOR MARK JESKE