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James 2:1-13

Fifth Message

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THE RIGHT KIND OF FRIENDS

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

As I studied for this message last week, I thought of the country and western song, *Lifestyles of the Not So Rich and Famous*:

They're gonna put us on
Lifestyles of the not so rich and famous.
They wanna see us go hog wild
Over beans and barbeque.
They wanna see my Fairlane up on blocks,
The holes in all our socks.
Talkin 'bout lifestyles of the not so rich and famous.
Tell 'em bout your mama and the bowling league,
Tell 'em bout junior and his baseball team,
I'll show 'em my nine point buck on the wall,
I'll blow a few times on my new duck call,
Let 'em see ol' blue how he sleeps all day,
We'll bring out the Elvis TV trays.

We don't get excited about the lifestyles of the not so rich and famous. (Pat Harrison, our junior high pastor, calls them the lifestyles of the shy and nervous). We are more enamored with the lifestyles of the rich and famous. That is why we watch the tabloid TV shows and the Barbara Walters interviews with movie stars. That is why we read *People* magazine. We get goose bumps when we find ourselves close to a famous person.

This attraction to the rich and famous is a significant issue in the church. The book of James challenges us to live Christianly amidst the pressure of trials, and we have already seen how to should respond to discouragement, confusion, embarrassment, sin and anger. Today we come to pressures relating to the kind of people we devote ourselves to and the friendships we develop. James has already compared the rich and poor, in chapter 1. As we begin chapter 2 today, he expands on his comparison. Verses 1-4:

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. 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 dressed in dirty clothes, 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," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? (James 2:1-4 NASB)

The issue here is personal favoritism, or partiality. Partiality means "to lift the face." If someone were to bow before you and you extended your hand to lift up his face, you would be bestowing special honor upon him. In the New Testament, Paul uses this word in Romans 2:11 to say that "there is no partiality with God." God does not favor one person or one race over another. James exhorts Christian brethren to relate to people in the same manner, "not to hold their faith...with favoritism." Obviously, this was what was going on in the community to whom he wrote this letter.

James illustrates his point by describing two men who enter the assembly and the different reactions they receive. One is dressed to the hilt. He is wearing a gold ring and beautifully tailored clothes. The other man is poor. He is attired in dirty clothes, in hand-me-downs. It is clothes that make the difference here. Mark Twain would agree. He observed: "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society." So the brethren in the assembly pay special attention to the rich man. Literally, they look upon him very intently. He catches their eye. They say to him, "sit here in a good place." But the poor man in dirty clothes is told to "stand in the corner, or sit on the floor." A judgment is made, and care is extended to the rich man. He is favored and honored.

Many of us do the same, either consciously or unconsciously. We are attracted to people who have status—the "beautiful people," as they are called. But we neglect the homely, the unpopular; they drain us emotionally. At a dinner party we survey the crowd to see if we can sit with attractive people. We ask who will be attending social events to determine if it's worth our while going. In church, we look around for people we want to associate with. While we are talking to one person, our eyes are scanning the room, looking for other contacts.

In one episode of the television sitcom, *All In the Family*, Edith and Archie Bunker are attending Edith's high school class reunion. Edith encounters an old classmate, Buck, who has become very obese. They have a delightful conversation about old times and, remarkably, Edith doesn't seem to notice how much overweight Buck has become. Later, she says to Archie, "Ain't Buck a beautiful person?" Archie replies, "Edith, I'll never figure you out. You and I can look at the same guy. You see a beautiful person, and I see a blimp." Edith says, "Yeah, ain't that too bad?"

Why do we do favor the rich and beautiful? There are probably many reasons, but let us keep in mind the context of this letter of James. This book is about suffering and trials. It teaches us how to face situations that make us feel vulnerable, uncomfortable, needy and insecure. The brethren to whom the letter was first addressed were the oppressed aliens and exiles of the Diaspora. Associating with people who make us feel better and more secure about ourselves is one way we respond to trials. It might help us in a financial crisis. The poor, on the other hand, do not do much to enhance our life; they take up too much valuable time, we feel. We are seeking upward mobility, so we neglect and dishonor the dull and boring in favor of the rich and famous.

The problem with this, according to James, is that we are making judgments with evil motives. We are making distinctions based on the wrong criteria, for selfish reasons, about who is worthy and who is not. Depending on looks, wealth and personality, we favor one person over another. People who are valuable in God's eyes are neglected and devalued. We enter into relationships for what we will receive. We become users of people rather than lovers of people. We seek to gain from the rich instead of ministering to the orphans and

widows. We take the place of God by being a judge of people, rather than following in the steps of Jesus by being a servant of God. Anthony DeMello said, “If you are prejudiced, you will see a person from the eye of that prejudice. In other words, you will cease to see that person as a person.” Before his death, Carl Sandburg was asked, “What is the worst word in the English language?” Without hesitation, he replied, “Exclusivism.”

The solution to this problem of favoritism in the church is introduced in verse 5. James says, “Listen, my beloved brethren.” This phrase is similar in construction to his admonition in verse 1:19, to “know, my beloved brethren.” Both phrases speak of his affection for his readers, but they summon them to really hear the truth so that they might be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.” Verses 5-13:

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? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one 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. 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. (2:5-13)

In these verses James suggests three things that will help us treat all people with equality and compassion. First, he points out God’s special relationship with the poor. Verse 5: “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?” Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” James is speaking of the financially poor, the downtrodden, the emotionally bankrupt—those who lack the talents and gifts that win acclaim from the world. But we consider them unworthy of our time, so we ignore them or shuttle them along to someone else. If we do this, we are regarding the poor in the same manner that the world regarded Jesus, as we read in the prophecy of Isaiah:

**He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him.
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him
He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
Surely our griefs He Himself bore
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken
Smitten of God and afflicted. (Isa 53:2b-4)**

But God has a very different view of the poor. He looks upon them with a compassionate heart. What they lack in physical assets he makes up with spiritual wealth. The poor do not have a bank account or a new car in the garage, but God has chosen them to be wealthy in faith. This is what he said of his Suffering Servant:

**“Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.” (Isa 42:1a)**

Poverty can actually be a blessing. The poor have no resources of their own, so they place their trust in God; therefore, they have a greater capacity for faith. Some day, because of their faith and love for God, he will lavish upon them the garlands of the kingdom. If God thinks so highly of the poor, shouldn’t we do the same? If we treat them with disdain and contempt, especially in the Body of Christ, we dishonor the very ones whom God has chosen for his kingdom. We are tempted to pay special attention to the rich man in order that we might be blessed, but the truth of the matter is that the poor person’s greater faith offers the richer blessing.

This has been our experience each year when we minister in the Yucatan peninsula, in Mexico. We look like rich people, and we think we will bless the poor in that place, but the reality is that the ones we minister to are rich in faith, and they bless us.

The second helpful point that James makes to his readers is, consider the ethics and spiritual life of the rich (6b-7). The rich people they were seeking to cultivate were the very ones who were oppressing them and taking them to court. The rich were using unethical means to make money, because money meant more to them than people. They did not care about people, and they did not care about God. They blasphemed the name Christian. They had no fear of God and no respect for people who did. They were anti-people and anti-God.

Why then do we favor the rich and pay special attention to people who don’t care about us or God? Peter G. van Breeman comments: “The irony...is that the opinions we fear most are not those of people we really respect, yet these same persons influence our lives more than we want to admit.”

In the gospels, Jesus related the story of Lazarus and the rich man. In life, Lazarus ate the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. In death, the rich man in his torment saw Lazarus “in the bosom of Abraham.” He asked God to send Lazarus to him to quench his thirst, and to send him to earth to warn his brothers to not act as he did. In eternity, it is the rich that end up poor.

I am not suggesting that wealth in itself is immoral, or that wealthy people are unworthy. Many people of wealth and prominence have the highest integrity and ethics. What is wrong is the means by which some wealth is garnered; and our propensity to pay high regard to the rich and popular over the poor. Nor am I suggesting that we should ignore the rich. We are to regard people honestly and purely, as God sees them. The truth of the matter is, we are all poor. There is no partiality with God; there should not be any with us, either.

Third, says James, we should consider the seriousness of showing favoritism (8-13). He calls on the witness of the law to bring conviction to the community of believers, appealing to the royal law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The full reading of Leviticus shows its applicability to this particular problem. Lev 19:15: “You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly.” Lev 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Rudyard Kipling in his poem *If*, said that one of the attributes of manhood is, “If you can walk with crowds and keep your virtue, or talk with kings nor lose the common touch.”

James says if we fulfill the royal law, the law of liberty, we are doing well, but if we are not following that law and are showing

partiality in our judgments of people, then we are committing sin. “Law of liberty” here is the same phrase used by James in chapter 1 in his appeal to his readers to become “doers of the word”—an action that manifests itself in caring for orphans and widows. James “ups the ante” a bit by then declaring that the one who shows favoritism is a transgressor of the law. He says that even if you keep the law but fail at one point, you have broken the whole law.

Favoritism is serious issue. Showing partiality is not a result of a “bad hair day” or getting out on the wrong side of bed, it is sin which disrupts the very foundation of the Christian faith and community. Brennan Manning wrote that he found God bringing him to just such a conviction:

One lonely night in the Colorado Rockies, I heard this message: “Brennan, you bring your full presence and attention to certain members of the community but offer a diminished presence to others. Those who have stature, wealth, and charisma, those you find interesting or charming or pretty or famous command your undivided attention, but people you consider plain or dowdy, those of lesser rank performing menial tasks, the unsung and uncelebrated are not treated with the same regard. This is not a minor matter to me, Brennan. The way you are with others every day, regardless of their status, is the true test of faith.”

James exhorts Christians to so speak and act as those who are about to be judged by the law of liberty, the law of love, found in the words, “love your neighbor as yourself.” If we show mercy and love to the poor, God will respond to us in like manner. But if we neglect to show mercy, then God’s judgment of us will be without mercy. Here, James’ words echo the words of Jesus: “For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matt 6:14).

Mercy triumphs over judgment; love covers a multitude of sins. If we commit ourselves to mercy and love, we will receive mercy in return. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.” The point here is that God has already demonstrated love and mercy towards us. Our sin and selfishness do not affect God’s loyal love for us. If God shows such mercy towards us, then we should treat others the same way.

The solution to favoritism is discerning the truth about the poor and the rich, and regarding favoritism as sin.

A sense of community is a very important element in life. The television sitcom *Friends* portrays a group of friends who play together and offer one another support and encouragement. Of course, it doesn’t hurt that they are all attractive people, and each has a great sense of humor.

As the father of teenagers, I sense the importance of community in their lives. Teenagers spend a lot of time trying to find the right circle of people to share life with. If they don’t find this, life can be very difficult for them. A circle of supportive friends is a great source of encouragement and love. But this is not limited to teenagers. We all spend a great deal of time finding the right people to associate with.

But we have to be careful here. Our perspectives can become distorted and our motives selfish. In the process of finding friends we can become selective and exclusive. We may try to attach ourselves to the rich and famous, seeking to elevate our status to the

neglect of others, but James says this is sin. Oftentimes, the people we are avoiding, the poor who are standing right next to us, are the very friends and community that we are seeking, but we are blind to them. They can bless us and they can be blessed by us, but we send them to the corner of our hearts. If we ask, Who is a friend? we might be surprised by the answer. A friend is one with whom we share compassion, the very compassion of Christ.

I will never forget a young Christian woman whom God put in my life when I first moved to California. After a heavy dose of worldly living, I had just become a Christian. I met this woman at a Bible study. I probably would not have picked her out; she was quiet and shy. She lived in an apartment in the same building as me, and on Friday evenings, when I didn’t know what to do with myself, I would visit her. It was a place where I could hang out and talk instead of heading to where the popular people went. When I began to date my future wife, I was nervous about her meeting my friend. Liz was not yet a Christian, and I was afraid my friend might spill the beans and I would project an image to Liz that I didn’t want. One day Liz and I ran into my friend, and I discovered they knew each other from high school. They embraced like old friends. Liz, my non-Christian girlfriend, didn’t make distinctions like I did. When Liz came to Christ, the first person she called was my friend. I feel that this woman, this gift from God, saved my life. She was a true friend.

Jesus had a way of dealing with favoritism. When the disciples argued about who was the greatest among them, Jesus took a child and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me” (Matt 18:3).

Children are poor in that they are dependent on others. They can be seen as interruptions and distractions—they don’t have degrees or influence; they do not help us get ahead—but they have trusting, compassionate hearts. Jesus says we are to be like them. If we will love the not so rich and famous, we must become poor, remembering that we are really no different from them. If we see ourselves with God’s eyes, recognizing our weaknesses and sin, we will forsake favoritism and embrace everyone, rich and poor alike, in Christ.

Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche ministry to the handicapped, said, “Jesus always leads us to littleness. It is the place where misery and mercy meet. It is the place where we encounter God.”

James says we must so speak and so act. It isn’t that hard, really. Rather than examining whether we love our neighbor, C. S. Lewis says we should act as if we did. If we act lovingly toward them, we will presently come to love them. It is a matter of doing, not just hearing.

Speaking of Christians early in the first century, Aristides said to the Roman Emperor Hadrian:

They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don’t consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit, in God.

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