James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Five · Robby Randall

The Good Seat

Partiality, Honor, and the Mercy That Triumphs

James 2:1–17

Last week James handed us a mirror. He warned that the person who hears the Word without doing it is like a man who studies his face in a mirror, walks away, and forgets what he looks like. Then he defined the religion that is pure before God: care for orphans and widows in their affliction, and keep yourself unstained from the world.

Now James holds that same mirror up to the way we treat people. Notice how he speaks. He calls his readers "my brothers" and "my beloved brothers." He is tender toward them. But his message is direct, even confrontational. That is how love talks when it refuses to leave you where you are.

So before this chapter makes you think of someone else (another church, another political group, another race, another generation), ask one question with me. It will come back again and again: *Lord, where is this in me?* Let the Word confront you, so that God can conform you to the image of Christ. Open your Bibles to James 2.

i.

Crowned with Glory and Honor

Start at the beginning. At creation, humanity was made in the image of God, made for connection with Him and with one another. Psalm 8 says God crowned us with glory and honor. Honor is not something you hand out once people earn it. God has already placed dignity on every human being as His image-bearer.

> Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.
>
> Psalm 8:5, ESV

Then came the Fall. Sin fractured our connection with God and with one another. One chapter later, Cain looks at his brother with bitterness, then hostility, then murder.

But God did not leave it there. In redemption, God moves toward what the Fall has broken and reconciles it through Christ. And one day He will restore all things. Division and hostility will not have the final word. James 2 zooms in on one particular effect of the Fall, and he gives it a name: partiality.

ii.

James Names the Heart Problem

> My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?
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> James 2:1–4, ESV

What is partiality? It is an unfair bias or preference in favor of one person, group, or side over another. It is a special fondness that tilts the scale. James' principle is partiality. His example is rich and poor.

Picture the scene. One man gets the good seat because of his wealth, his appearance, his influence, and his status. The other is told to stand aside or sit at someone's feet. Nobody had to say a harsh word. The seating chart said it for them.

But James is addressing more than outward behavior. These people have become judges with evil thoughts. Like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, James goes past the action and after the heart. The seat was only the symptom.

iii.

Honor and Dishonor

> Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?
>
> James 2:5–7, ESV

James says it plainly: you have dishonored the poor man. Yet God has honored that same poor believer as rich in faith and an heir of the kingdom. The church looked at him and saw nothing. God looked at him and saw an heir.

At the same time, James confronts the irrational honor given to the rich men in his example. Their character did not justify the honor they were receiving. They were oppressing the church, and the church was still handing them the best seat.

Now hear me carefully. Scripture does teach us to give honor where honor is due. James is not saying everyone deserves identical trust, authority, admiration, or access. The issue is a heart that assigns honor and dishonor according to a value system different from God's.

And this is bigger than rich and poor. The same heart problem shows up around wealth and poverty, education and intelligence, appearance and athletic ability, success and power, race, culture, and nationality, male and female, political identity, and church background. The central question is not merely how you behave in public. It is whom your heart instinctively honors, and whom it instinctively dishonors.

iv.

The Fall Divides, the Gospel Reconciles

Across human history, cultural and ethnic groups have honored their own and dishonored everyone else. In Ephesians 2, Paul takes on one of the deepest divides the ancient world knew, the divide between Jew and Gentile. It was ethnic, cultural, religious, and historical, and it ran straight through the early church.

> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.
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> Ephesians 2:14–16, ESV

The gospel does not only reconcile you vertically to God. It begins reconciling you horizontally to one another. Galatians 3:28 names Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, and says all are one in Christ Jesus. Those distinctions do not determine your worth before God, your access to Christ, or your membership in God's family.

Partiality rebuilds the dividing walls
that Jesus died to tear down.

Before You Turn the Page

So turn the question inward. Who do you instinctively honor? Who immediately impresses you? Who gets the good seat in your heart? Now the harder side. Who do you instinctively dishonor? Who causes contempt to rise in you? Who do you dismiss before they ever speak?

Don't answer for your neighbor. Answer for yourself, and pray it honestly: *Lord, where is this in me?*

v.

My Partiality Looked Backwards

Let me tell you where I found it in me. I grew up with autoimmune disease, visible eczema, and physical limitations, and I was teased and bullied for it. That created real pain and real rejection. Some of that was the effect of the Fall happening to me.

But the Fall also shaped the sinful ways I responded. I identified with outsiders and overlooked people. But I developed a bias against certain successful, athletic, wealthy, academic, or "put together" people. And I could excuse destructive behavior in people I identified with, simply because I felt safe with them. My partiality didn't look like the church in James 2. It looked backwards. It was still partiality. My pain helped explain my partiality, but it did not make my partiality righteous.

So what is underneath yours? Favoritism can grow from pride, insecurity, fear, pain, rejection, envy, bitterness, offense, or the desire for approval. James confronts the outward partiality, but he is exposing something deeper. Ask the question beneath the question: Why does my heart want to honor this person and dishonor that one?

vi.

The Royal Law and a Living Faith

> If you really fulfill 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.
>
> James 2:8–9, ESV

The goal is not merely to stop being biased. The gospel transforms your value system, so that you increasingly see and love people according to God's heart. Instead of asking what a person can do for you, whether they impress you, or whether they belong to your group, you start asking two new questions. How does God see this person? What does love require of me?

> What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.
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> James 2:14–17, ESV

James has not changed subjects. He opened the chapter speaking to people who hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and he has been showing what that faith should look like in the way people are treated. A healthy tree eventually bears fruit. In the same way, living faith becomes visible over time. Faith in Jesus changes the way you treat the person standing in front of you.

vii.

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

> So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.
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> James 2:12–13, ESV

As we come to the table, hold on to that last line. We have all experienced effects of the Fall that were not our fault. But we have also sinned ourselves. At the cross we receive mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. People who have received mercy are called to extend mercy.

> But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.
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> James 4:6–8, ESV

If God has exposed partiality in you, the response is humility, surrender, and repentance. Submit to God. Draw near to Him. Cleanse your hands, purify your heart, and humble yourself before the Lord. Your pain may explain why your partiality developed, but Jesus wants to do more than explain it. He wants to meet you in the pain and redeem what the pain has produced in your heart.

So sit with these before you come to the table. Who have I improperly honored? Who have I dishonored? What pain, fear, pride, or bitterness might be underneath it? Where is Jesus asking me to repent?

The Whole Story

Created with Honor › Fractured by the Fall › Reconciled at the Cross › Restored in Love

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Mercy triumphs over judgment.
Receive mercy. Show mercy. Love your neighbor as yourself.

. . .

Soli Deo Gloria

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