

Faith Works (James) / 4: Judgment – Mercy / June 19, 2016

We tend to judge people by how they look, don't we? Even in church we tend to judge people by how they look, right? Did you know that's a sin – it's a sin against God. I'll show you...

Believe it or not, there was a time when people actually paid for their seats in church. They thought they had the right to tell you, "That's my row, that's my pew, you can't sit in my seat without my permission." They could actually make you move if you had the audacity to take their seat. What's even weirder is that the closer the seats were to the front, the more expensive they were. After all, you can see better up here, you can hear better up here – remember, there were no mics back then. And ... you can be seen better up here – which was a really big deal, back then. Kind of a status symbol – to have seats right up front in church. Kind of like at a ball game, or a theater – the most expensive seats are in front, the cheap seats are in the rear. I figure it's an idea that might be worth a try here at Capital City, only we'd have to flip it around. A lot of you guys want to sit up front at just about anything except church; in church you want the back row. I think we could make a lot of money selling seats in the back row! Or maybe the aisle seats. Then we'd put the cheap seats in the middle of the aisle and the freebies up front. We could probably pay off our mortgage if we did that!

Well a couple hundred years ago a young man by the name of William Booth decided to stir things up. He opened the main door of the church and ushered in a group of really messy people ... the kind of people the "proper" church folk weren't sure were welcome. These misfits wore clothes that didn't fit in church – they were too shabby. Well, Booth herded these messy people right up front, into the very best seats – the paid seats. That was scandalous; and the proper people were staring them down. Usually, if the poor came at all, they would slip in through a side door, and they would be segregated on benches in the back without seatbacks or cushions. And they would sit behind a partition, which kept them from seeing ... or being seen. And Booth didn't like it, and he hoped he could stir a change. But he couldn't, there, yet. Well, maybe he did. Maybe that's when the rich people moved to the back row, and they haven't moved since. Anyway, Booth went on to found the Salvation Army.

You see, over time most churches become somewhat elitist, somewhat snobbish. We forget who we are, and what we are about. And inside these walls we tend to defer to some people, and marginalize others ... kind of like we do outside these walls. If someone has a lot of money, we treat them special. Their opinions carry

more weight, right? We offer them positions of leadership. After all, if someone can run a bank or a business, surely they can lead a church, right? Of if someone is really smart – especially if they have several diplomas hanging on their walls, like I do – well we deserve extra honor, don't we? And we deserve positions of leadership, don't we? Or if someone was a great athlete once, or if someone has a perfect body, or if someone has some amazing talent ... surely they deserve better seats, don't they? ... Guys, I hope you're pushing back!

We're working our way through the book of James this summer. It's a great little book. And we are all the way to chapter 2. I've asked my granddaughter, Morgan, to read the verses we are going to unpack this morning. By the way, that's Morgan and Kennedy with Abby last Tuesday down at the river. Those are our kids, guys. Abby is giving her life to Jesus. And our kids are baptizing their friends! Is that not incredible? I love that. That was Morgan's first baptism. I hope she does a whole lot more, don't you? You see, that's what we're all about – all of us. Well I have asked Morgan to read James 2.1-13. And as she is reading I want you to try to listen for the what, the why, and the better way. That's what we're looking for: the what, the why, and the better way.

Morgan: "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old 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 and sisters: 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 dishonored 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 blaspheming 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, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall 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."

OK, So the what is right there up front, verse 1: Don't show favoritism in church, don't play favorites in church. No partiality, no prejudice, no discrimination in church. What it says literally, in Greek, is this: "Don't receive someone by their face," don't judge people by how they look on the outside.

And then James jumps right into one of the biggest catalysts for favoritism: money. We tend to show partiality to people with money. He says, (verse 2) "Suppose a man comes into your meeting (comes into your church) wearing a gold ring (literally James says he has "gold fingers" he has so much bling) and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes ..." (2-3) you are sinning ... against God, he says. We'll get there, in just a couple minutes.

They did that a lot back then: being partial to the rich, and dissing the poor. But the principle, the big idea also applies to a lot of other ways we show partiality.

- Sometimes we are partial to those who are prettier than others, or who are more fit, who have better bodies than others. That happens all the time outside these walls – people are mocked because they are too fat, or too skinny, or too uncoordinated, or too weak. But if you are an athlete, or a ninja warrior, or you have a beach body, you are treated better, right?
- Sometimes it has to do with age. The young mock the old; the old mock the young. It happens out there all the time. It even happens in here – sometimes even among our staff.
- Sometimes it's about IQ, and education. I can guarantee you that those with PhDs are tempted to look down on those without them. And those without them are prone to fire right back.
- This is one of the worst: We're partial to those to those who can sing well – American idols; we're partial to those who can read a script and act like someone they are not. We treat musicians and actors like gods! Incredible!
- A lot of times we are partial to those with power and influence.
- We are even partial to those who are taller! Did you know that the taller you are the more money you are likely to make? That's what the stats show. Did you know that there were some right here, at Capital City, who were concerned that Jordan might be too short to be an effective Student Pastor! By the way, he's doing a great job!

The fact is, in our world, we are partial to people based on how they look, or how much money they have, or how much talent they have, or how much power they have ... And James says: No! Not here! That's the what: We don't play favorites in church. No partiality, no prejudice, no discrimination in church.

Now I suppose James could have left it at that and moved on. After all, this is James, the brother of Jesus, one of the big guys in the early church. He had authority. He's speaking to us from God, and when God speaks, we Jesus followers listen. Right? God doesn't have to give us a reason. We don't have to understand him to obey him – he's God. We don't have to agree with him to obey him – he's God, we're not. A parent has every right to tell a kid: "Because I said so." And God has every right to tell us: "No partiality in my church – because I said so." But he goes on and explains himself. He gives us two reasons we don't play favorites in church: (1) because it dishonors God, and (2) because it dishonors our brothers and sisters.

Here's verse 5. James says, "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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?" Can't you see how God works? You see, we're pushing down the very people he's trying to lift up ... and that dishonors him. We're trying to undo what God is trying to do ... and that dishonors him.

Now there are times, I think, when it is fully appropriate to show some partiality. The last time I played softball for Capital City, several years ago, they made me catcher! Now I've got to tell you: catcher in slow pitch softball is not nearly as prestigious as catcher in baseball. I grew up playing baseball. I was a shortstop, I was a third baseman, I even pitched a little. Well, they make you catcher in softball when they don't think you can catch, any more ... or throw very hard, or run very fast. Well I was a little annoyed, till I looked around the field and studied the other players. And then it dawned on me, I think catcher is where I belong, now. That's humbling. They were right to show partiality to the more talented, because they wanted to win.

I think it is fully appropriate for Steve Smith to show partiality when he makes you audition for the worship team. The Bible tells us to contribute to the body, to the church family, based on our gifts. If you are not gifted musically, you are probably not called by God to lead the church musically. We want the people on our worship team to sing well, and play well. We want teachers who can teach, and cooks who can cook, and hosts who know how to smile. That kind of partiality is okay, I think.

But sometimes we go way too far, and we push down the very people God is trying to lift up, based on things that don't matter a hill of beans ... eternally.

Listen to how God does things. This is from the apostle Paul. He says, “Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. (Aren’t you glad God doesn’t show partiality to the rich and the beautiful?) Instead, (Paul says) God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. (He says,) God chose things despised by the world, (he’s talking about us!) things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one (no one!) can ever boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1.26-29)

You see, God isn’t after the best, the smartest, the most attractive, the most talented, the wealthiest – although he does want them too. God doesn’t throw little parties in heaven when little people are baptized and huge parties in heaven when one of the beautiful people comes to God. So why are we Jesus followers prone to do that very thing? That’s doesn’t honor the God we live to honor. Look around the room, guys. If God is after the top 2 percenters, he’s kind of messing up here!

But some of you guys may be kicking back a little. You might be thinking, “But I am a top 2 percenter. I’ve got a lot of money, or I got a 35 on my ACT, or I qualified for the Voice, or I’ve got the body of an American Ninja Warrior.” And God kind of whispers back – “Do you think I am awed by your awesomeness? Do you think I am impressed by your bank account, or your voice, or your jump-shot? Do you think that’s why I love you, why I’m pursuing you? Do you think people are finding eternal life because of your awesomeness? Come on!”

James says, When we discriminate, when we show partiality, or favoritism, we kind of take God’s place – we become judges; but we don’t do it well like he does – we are judges (he says) with evil thoughts, evil motives. And when we become judges, when we become our own little mini-gods, we dishonor the real one.

But it’s not just God we dishonor. Here are verses 6 and 7. James says, “But you have (also) dishonored the poor. (Think about it) 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 blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?” You see, in the world of the New Testament, money meant power; and in their world the powerful walked all over the powerless. So the powerless would kiss up to the powerful.

It still happens today, doesn't it? You've seen it happen. You've seen people fawn all over celebrities who wouldn't give them the time of day. You've seen Christians do it. You've seen Christians fawn all over celebrities who mock everything we stand for. We idolize athletes who are immoral twits. You've seen it closer to home. Maybe you've done it. Have you ever kissed up to "beautiful people" because you want them to accept you? Or to powerful people because you want them to notice you? ... Even though they stand against what we stand for. Come on! Playing favorites dishonors God, and it dishonors the very people God tells us to love.

Now, I need to pause for just a moment to make sure we are hearing what James is saying. James is not telling us to flip things around and favor the poor. He's telling us: No favoritism ... at all. We do not favor the rich, and we do not favor the poor. You don't show partiality to the powerful, nor to the powerless. We don't play favorites, we don't discriminate, we show no partiality here, in his family. Because that's how God is.

Listen, this is really important. You are not closer to God because you are rich, and you are not closer to God because you are poor. There are Christians who buy both those myths. There are Christians who teach that nonsense. Some people think that money is a sign of God's blessing; and others think it's a sin to have money if you are a Jesus follower. There's a technical word for both those ideas: it's called, "poppycok." There are 4 kinds of people in the Bible when it comes to money.

- There are the godly poor. It kind of looks like the family of Jesus was poor. And they were quite godly – the godly poor. And one of Jesus' greatest stories was about an extremely poor widow. She put a tiny coin in the offering box. And Jesus says that she was giving more than anyone else, in God's eyes. They are all over the Bible – the godly poor.
- But there are also the godly rich. And there are a lot of them in the Bible, too. Guys like Abraham, and Joseph, and Daniel, and Job. Guys like Joseph of Arimathea, who offered his own tomb so they could bury Jesus – the Bible says Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb. Joseph didn't know Jesus would only need his tomb for a couple days.
- And then there are the ungodly poor. And there are lots of them in the Bible, too. The book of Proverbs talks about sluggards. These are dorks who won't work. Or when they get a few bucks they head straight for a

lottery ticket. Or, they are always chasing after some get rich quick scheme. Or they are the ones who feel entitled. You see, in the Bible, just because you are poor doesn't mean you are godly.

- And then there are the ungodly rich. And there are lots of them in the Bible too. Guys like Pharaoh – who oppressed the Israelites, and Herod – who tried to kill Jesus when he was just a kid. Guys like the rich young man who came to Jesus asking what he needed to do to be saved. Jesus said, “Give your stuff away and come follow me.” Jesus told him, “You have to choose: you can't love me and your money.” And the young guy walked away, because he loved his stuff more than he loved his God.

You see, in the Bible it's not about whether you are rich or poor, it's whether you are godly or ungodly. It's about what comes first in your life. When it comes to money, it comes down to how you get it, and what you do with it; it comes down to whether you honor him with what he lets you have, or whether you think it's all about you. If you think about it, Jesus was both rich and poor. The Bible says, “Though he was rich...” And he was! Before coming into our world Jesus owned everything -- everything. “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor ...” He was from a hick town, his dad a carpenter. When he grew up he owned no home – no place to lay his head. He didn't have the money to pay his taxes. He didn't have the money to buy a tomb. It says, “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich” ... spiritually; the kind of rich that really matters. (2 Corinthians 8.9) You see, if you are poor, be poor like Jesus. If you are rich, be rich like Jesus. It's not about the money, it's about whether you are God honoring.

So, here's the what: Don't show partiality. Here's the why: because it dishonors God, and it dishonors the people God loves. And here's the better way: Just live out the second greatest commandment. Do you remember the two greatest commandments? #1: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. He's first, in everything. #2: Love your neighbor as yourself. Get these two right, and most everything else falls into line.

So, here's what James says next. He says, “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism (which means you are not loving your neighbor as yourself), you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.” (James 1.8-9) Partiality is a sin. Judging people based on outward appearances is a sin. And as Jesus

followers, we don't just know what his law says, we do it. We do the word ... because real faith works.

And then it almost seems like James goes too far. It's kind of weird, when you first look at it. He says, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker." (James 2.10-11) So, if you commit murder, you are breaking God's law – you're a sinner. And if you commit adultery, you are breaking God's law – you're a sinner. And "if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers." (9) Really?! He puts playing favorites right up there with murder and adultery? Do you find that a little over the top?

But this is a big deal to God, guys! It's a really big deal. If you are a racist, you dishonor God, and you're dishonoring someone he loves. If you play favorites, you dishonor God, and you're dishonoring someone he loves. If you lift up people God is trying to humble, and put down people God is trying to lift up, you are working against God. This is a really big deal. Maybe you are pushing back: But everyone is doing it! And God says, "I don't."

Now, how James wraps this up is powerful. He says, "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. (And then here is my favorite line. He says,) Mercy triumphs over judgment."

So he says, live like those who know that someday we are going to stand before God and give an account. Now he's not going to require that you have done this stuff perfectly. But it is going to matter whether you tried to live a God-honoring life. God does not demand perfection, but he does expect you to take this stuff seriously. And if you really are a Jesus follower, he will see progress.

You see, there are some folks who claim to believe in Jesus, but they have no real desire to let him change who they are and how they live. If that's where you are, then he's not your ... Lord. We are not Jesus followers because we believe he was the Son of God and rose from the dead. We are Jesus followers because we choose him as both Savior and Lord.

And then his final words: "Mercy triumphs over judgment." I love that. It means, when grace and truth clash, grace wins. There are people who get tired of

hearing about God's mercy, about his grace. There are people who want to hear more about God's judgment. They think that's what will drive people to God, and keep them on the straight and narrow. James says, Mercy triumphs over judgment. This whole thing is about grace, guys. Remember where you were when he saved you. (LS) Remember what it is that got you in. Remember what it is that keeps you in. Remember what it will be that will elicit the Father's smile on that day. It is grace. If you get tired of it, you don't get it.

Now, we have some work to do. We have some work to do as individual Jesus followers, and we have some work to do as a church. You need to listen to God when he convicts you of partiality, and stop it. But I want to wrap this up by reflecting on what this means for us as a church.

This stuff is really hard for us as pastors, as hard for us as it is for you. It's hard for us not to be partial – to the rich, the powerful, the talented, the smart. It's the main reason I don't know what any of you puts in the offering box week after week. I don't want to know who gives a lot of money. It would be too tempting for me to look at them differently. And I don't want to know who doesn't give, or who has stopped giving. That's a serious issue, spiritually. But I fear it would be too tempting for me to look at you as a judge. And that's not my job. That's his.

Way too many churches are run by the rich and the powerful. That's not God's way. Way too many churches are run by a few of the oldest, or a few of those who have been there longer than anyone else. That's not God's way. Way too many churches put just their elite, their 2 percenters on their board. That's not God's way. Guys, I'd rather be led poorly in the right direction than brilliantly in the wrong direction. We want to be a God-honoring church.

Some people say that Sunday morning at 11:00 is the most segregated hour in America. To the degree that that is true, that's one of the outcomes of the sin of partiality, isn't it? Well, not here. Some churches grow cliquish. They are wonderful and they are warm, if you are one of the insiders; but they're cold and aloof if you are not. Guys, not here. Some churches give preference to the old, some churches give preference to the young. Here at Capital City we want to give preference to those we are trying to bring to Jesus. It's not about us; it's about honoring him and drawing as many as we can to him.