

The Third Sunday of Lent

*Pursuing Holiness, Part 3
Relationships of Grace
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During this season of Lent we are learning about and (I pray) practicing/applying what James is writing to the church. James is the half-brother of Jesus who humbly describes himself in his introduction as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is writing to brand new believers, mostly Christians with Jewish heritage, and he is firmly telling them how to continue the mission & ministry of Jesus in the world today. They have many old ways of thinking, old patterns of behaving, and old traditions they are following that need to be made new. And so do we. We have old ways of thinking, old patterns of behaving, and old traditions we are following that need to be made new. Today our theme from our study *Pursuing Holiness* is 'Relationships of Grace.' Let's pray together: *Merciful God, help us to still our minds and our hearts to hear what you want to teach us in your Word. Help us to be quick to listen and eager to receive with gratitude as you continue your work in us for the sake of those who are here and those who are not here yet. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Let's begin by looking at the passage for today from James 2. *"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³If 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,"⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, 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? ⁶But 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? ⁷Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? ⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹For 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. ¹²Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."*

I want to begin the sermon on this passage by saying one sentence to hold in our minds. One sentence of truth to keep our feet on a firm foundation. **The ground is level at the foot of the cross.** As I said several weeks ago, there are two kinds of people: People who are created by God and are not yet children of God, and people who are created by God who have been adopted into God's family through faith in Jesus Christ and are now (and ever will be) children of God. At the foot of the cross everyone created by God is welcome. That means everyone is welcome. Everyone is welcome. It doesn't matter how much money is in your bank account, what clothes you wear, or how much education you have – **the ground is level at the foot of the cross.**

In the culture at the time of James' writing (and I dare say today as well), the rich were deferred to, were given special treatment, were seen as near royalty, and whether what he described regarding the rich man with the gold ring and the fancy clothes and the poor man wearing filthy clothes actually happened or whether James could envision it happening in the church, he is clearly telling them that showing favoritism in the family of God based on anything, but specifically based on wealth and appearance must not happen! Because – **the ground is level at the foot of the cross.**

There is a dangerous assumption we make, friends, that someone with the means to dress nicely and speak well is morally superior, smarter, more disciplined, more hard-working, and

thus a 'better person' – more fit for the family of God. James detests such thinking. He detests the fact that we might keep our distance from someone who obviously does not have all the benefits of house and home that we have. He detests the fact that we might choose to talk unkindly about or unkindly to (meaning bullying) someone whose life doesn't match ours. He calls it favoritism – and says that playing favorites because of how someone looks or because of what they have or don't have is an indication of a heart that is in need of renewal – a heart in need of a fresh dose of God's mercy and grace.

James commands us, "*As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism*" which in the Greek literally means "don't receive the face." "Don't receive the face." Don't look only at the externals. Don't judge a book by its cover. Don't receive the face. Don't show favoritism. But it's not just James who says this. Listen to these other scriptures:

- *Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great.* Leviticus 19:15
- *Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all.* Proverbs 22:2
- After Peter's vision from God in Acts about telling not just the Jews but the Gentiles about Jesus he said, "*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism,*" using the same word James used meaning, '*God does not receive the face.*' Acts 10:34.
- *The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.* 1 Samuel 16:7b

We must guard our minds and hearts against favoritism of every kind. We must search our hearts to see our attitude towards the poor, towards other races, towards people of other religions, towards the uneducated, and towards those who differ from us in any way. It is natural for us to gravitate towards others who are most like us, there's a sense of safety and security there, but never at the exclusion of others. Never should we prefer a stranger who looks more like us over a stranger who doesn't look like us, especially when it comes to being welcomed into the fellowship of the church. God looks at the heart. He looks at our hearts. What does he see there? Does he see a reflection of the wonderful, merciful heart of our Savior? We must practice holiness in regards to guarding against favoritism of any kind. We must practice mercy for all people. Because if we don't, brothers and sisters, if we let it roll & grow like a snowball within our fellowship, it may defy human detection for a time, but never God's detection. God sees it, and after a while, it could gut a church even while the walls still stand and the cross on top declares a different gospel.

We are all created by God in the image of God. Everyone has equal value in God's eyes. **The ground is level at the foot of the cross, folks.** Perhaps you have a name in your mind right now of someone you avoid, someone you have chosen not to forgive, and therefore someone from whom you withhold mercy. Perhaps you know that you are not merciful to a group of people who have a different color of skin, perhaps you know you are not merciful to others who don't share your particular interest or taste in sports, in music, in science, in politics, in art, in video games, in farming choices, in animals, in fashion, in hunting, in mission trips, in church itself, and in Jesus himself! How have you embraced favoritism – how have you received the face – and neglected the heart of another?

As we prepare to come to the Table of the Lord this morning, I invite you to write the names, write the people groups, write whatever you need to write as a prayer of confession to the Lord for how you have neglected to show love and mercy and grace to others. And then bring it and put it into the rocks at the foot of the cross as an acknowledgement of our sinful judgement, and as an acknowledgment of this truth: **The ground is level at the foot of the cross.** Oh Lord, please help us receive your correction this morning and become more like Jesus whose love for you and love for all people was beautiful to behold. Forgive us for showing favoritism of any and every kind. Forgive us and with each step we take towards the cross, cleanse us, and make us whole – for you alone bring the healing and grace our hearts always hunger for. Let us continue in prayer as we bring our confessions to the cross...