

“Authentic: Mercy Wins”

James 2:1-13 • Leviticus 19:9-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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If you've ever flown on Southwest Airlines, you know that they sometimes like to have fun along the way. For example, last summer I was traveling on Southwest and the flight attendants were going through the customary preflight instructions about seat belts and life preservers. Part of those instructions includes how to use the oxygen masks if the plane should lose cabin pressure. The flight attendant explained that if you are traveling with small children that you should put your own oxygen mask on before helping your child. Then for fun she added, "If you're traveling with more than one small child, go ahead and pick your favorite now."

If you're a parent, or have ever been a child, you know deep down inside that you're not supposed to show favoritism toward one of child over another. As we see in this passage, James is telling us that it works the same way in the church. He says, "show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." Sadly, church history shows us that this has not always been the case.

In 1739, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, had begun preaching to coal miners and other groups of people at the bottom of England's economy. Through his ministry many of those workers came to faith in Jesus. But they were not really welcome in the Church of England in those days and so Wesley reluctantly founded the Methodist-Episcopal Church so they would have a place to worship.

Sadly, 100 years later another Methodist, William Booth, noticed that the poorest people were never in church. So he brought them to church, dressed in their ragged clothes. But he didn't just bring them to church. In those days the poor were required to sit in a separate area, behind a screen, so they wouldn't be seen by the other parishioners. On that Sunday, however, Booth brought them into the church and had them sit in the best seats. This didn't sit well with the church leadership and he was expelled

from the church. Eventually Booth and his wife founded the Salvation Army to provide a place where poor people could hear the gospel.

It's not just the Methodists. At some point every denomination has stooped to discriminating against people based on race or social status or income or something else. It's human nature. But it's not God's nature. James reminds us that God judges each one of us equally and we should do the same. For us to show partiality or favoritism toward someone based on their outward appearance or on their ability to do something for us in return violates the Law of God. Beginning in verse 8 he says, "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."

It might seem strange that he makes such a big deal out of this. But as we've seen the past few weeks, James is concerned with what's in our heart. He has told us that if we have authentic faith that it will be visible by our actions. If you were here last week (or if you listened to last week's message online), you'll remember that James showed us three indications of authentic faith – controlling our tongue (the things we say); taking care of those in need; and keeping ourselves unstained by the world. What we're going to find in the next few weeks is that these three things are the theme of much of the rest of James.

So let's look at why the Bible tells us that showing partiality is so wrong. The problem centers around the Ten Commandments. When you read the Ten Commandments you discover that they can be divided into two parts. The first four commandments deal with our relationship with God and the other six deal with our relationships with other people. That's why when Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest he summarized them all by saying that the greatest

commandment is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

To discriminate against someone, to show partiality, violates both of these. He says that if a person wearing designer clothes and jewelry and a person wearing worn out “shabby” clothes show up in church at the same time and you pay attention to the one in the fine clothes and neglect or worse mistreat the poorer person, you have become a judge with evil thoughts. He says, “you have dishonored the poor man.” He reminds us that both people were created in God’s image. But James also points out that God has “chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith.”

It’s important to remember here that in God’s eyes we are all poor. On our own none of us has anything of value to offer to God. We can’t earn our way to heaven. We’re all sinners who deserve God’s punishment. In verse 10 James says, “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” He makes it clear that showing partiality is breaking committing sin, breaking God’s law, and if you break any part of it you’re guilty of breaking all of it.

The reason is simple. When we break God’s law we are essentially rejecting God who gave the law. If we think we can pick and choose which laws to follow we are putting ourselves in

a position higher than God. Because showing favoritism or partiality toward one and against another is not loving neighbors as ourselves, we are showing judgment without mercy and rejecting God’s commands. The scary thing is that, as verse 13 says, “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.” God will judge us the way we judge others.

Thankfully James leaves us with a note of hope. He writes, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” The point is that followers of Jesus, those united with Him, experience mercy from God. We are forgiven. The Apostle Paul wrote the church in Corinth, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” Jesus took the punishment we deserved. So while we will still be judged, we will not be condemned if we are in Christ Jesus.

As we work on growing in authentic faith, let me encourage you to begin by confessing your sin, even the sin of partiality, to God. Ask for forgiveness. View everyone who walks in the doors of the church as equal in the eyes of God and therefore equal in our eyes. And rest in God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Amen.