

TURNING THE CASUAL INTO THE ACTUAL

Part III: The Community of Belonging James 2:1-13 (NLT)

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:17)

A Chinese woman approached an ATM machine to retrieve some money. Everything was moving along smoothly until she began feeling a bit uneasy. Her hands began to tremble and beads of sweat developed on her face. All of a sudden she felt very uncomfortable about her surroundings. In a nutshell she was afraid something bad was going to happen to her and she was questioning herself why she would go to the bank so late at night. Then, a calming voice pierced through the silent air: “Ma’am,” the kind voice whispered, “There is nothing to worry about. I am also here to get some money. I will make sure you are safe and that nothing happens to you.” The woman responded with a heartfelt thanks and then walked away with a heavy guilt upon her shoulders.

“What happened to the woman?” you ask? Something very common, yet very unfortunate incident, took place. As she was preparing to get her money she noticed an African-American male approach the other ATM machine next to hers. Right away her prejudicial behavior took control and she assumed she was being robbed. Her nervous actions were very noticeable as she fidgeted back and forth expecting the worse. And whose voice spoke words of encouragement to her? The African-American person himself. He, too, noticed how the woman reacted when she saw him. He sensed her racism right away, but instead of reacting negatively, he responded in a positive loving way to her. He was just a regular normal person, just like her, but for some reason, in many people’s eyes, his skin color makes him into some bad person. When he offered his hand of grace upon the woman, she automatically realized that her behavior was wrong and unjust. She left in disgrace because she was a Christian; she should have known better.

A main characteristic of the Christian faith is the church’s unconditional embrace of all people. Our creative God uniquely designed each one of us through different colors and shades in the forms of nations, cultures, languages, ethnicities, personalities, etc. God expects his church to show kindness to all just as he mercifully does so for us. Unfortunately, the church lives in a broken world full of broken people. Just because we claim our identities in Jesus does not mean we will not succumb to the sinful act of prejudice and favoritism.

The church must be weary and sensitive to the negative impact of prejudice. We cannot take it lightly and sweep it under the rug. James, in his pursuit of turning casual faith into an active faith, speaks of this situation during his time, which is also relevant for us today. The church cannot foster an environment of hatred and division; instead, it must be a community of belonging for all humankind.

James unravels this truth beginning in chapter 2, verse 1:

¹ *My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim that you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people more than others? (James 2:1)*

James begins by stating a spiritual principle for the church:

I. Spiritual Principle: **True faith draws people into a community of belonging.** (verse 1)

James exerts the truth that there is no room for favoritism in the community of faith. In fact, one way to know that we are followers of Jesus Christ is through our unconditional acceptance of all people, especially those who are different from us.

James gives us an example of a prejudicial behavior:

II. Example of Prejudice (verses 2-4)

² *For instance, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in shabby clothes. ³ If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, “You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor”—well, ⁴ doesn’t this discrimination show that you are guided by wrong motives? (James 2:2-4)*

There are at least three things to highlight in this section.

- ‘fancy clothes and expensive jewelry’ – superficial pretension

Note how prejudice values superficiality over substance. That’s what makes favoritism so poisonous. We react unjustly based upon false motives and wrong impressions. The woman in the introduction above countered based upon the color of a person’s skin. Many of us reply based on things that do not reveal anything about an individual’s character at all. Does gold tell us that a person is a good person? Does a person with a shaved head mean that he is a horrible person? Does the title Ph.D. mean that the person carrying it is a wonderful and kind human being? How regrettable it is that Christians allow biases like this to influence how we impact the world for Christ. In fact, look at how we treat those who have ‘fancy clothes and expensive jewelry’:

- ‘good seat to the rich person’ – we only honor those that attract us

We go out of our way to honor those whom we think is valuable to us. Sometimes we do this because we think that somebody who is rich must be a hard honest worker in life and therefore deserve a place of prestige. Maybe if we promote them in honor we can receive some of their wealth. We have many excuses why we do unjust things, but none of them are right in God’s eyes. This is especially true when we shamefully treat somebody if they are not important to us:

- ‘stand over there...sit on the floor’ – disgrace and isolation

If we determine that somebody is useless to us, we automatically tag them as garbage and treat them with disrespect and indignity. The woman in the illustration, in her own personal selfishness, thought that the man was bad just because he was African-American. She responded in panic because deep within her soul she thought that this man will hurt her instead of upholding her. In her own sinful way she reacted by telling the man to ‘sit over there, and sit on the floor.’ But, on the contrary, the man was a gentle person, one in whom God would be proud of. And he engaged her in a very biblical way: he loved his own opponent. He did not have to, but he chose to.

As believers we must choose the way of embrace and acceptance, not allowing the superficiality of life establish for us what is right or wrong. Why is that? Because it is part of God’s perfect design:

III. Spiritual Principle Explained: **Prejudice is not part of God’s purpose or design.** (verses 5-7)

⁵ Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn’t God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren’t they the ones who will inherit the kingdom God promised to those who love him? ⁶ And yet, you insult the poor man! Isn’t it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? ⁷ Aren’t they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear? (James 2:5-7)

Two key points to highlight here:

- ‘Hasn’t God chosen the poor...’ – God embraces what the world despises

It is God who establishes how to love justly. Unfortunately, we sinfully follow the ways of the world instead of dutifully submitting to God’s design. His purpose was to embrace the poor because the world chooses to ignore them. But, we get swayed by the false brilliance that the world offers us and we unjustly treat those in whom God favors. But, notice that in many instances the people whom we promote actually hurt us:

- ‘[the rich] oppress you... [and] slander Jesus Christ’ – prejudice only promotes sin

We should not be surprised. Our very sin nature forces us to relate with others in prejudice. Thus, we should expect the same kind of prejudicial relationship towards us from other people.

That is why we should never develop relationships based upon what a person has, how a person looks, or who a person is. Instead, God commands us to love all people just like he does.

IV. Spiritual Command: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** (verses 8-9)

⁸ Yes indeed, it is good when you truly obey our Lord’s royal command found in the Scriptures: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁹ But if you pay special attention to the rich, you are committing a sin, for you are guilty of breaking that law. (James 2:8-9)

There are two main points to learn here about God's royal command of love:

- 'royal command' – directs all other laws connected with human relationships

According to James, to "love your neighbor as yourself" must be the command in which all other commands falls under. This law is the law of primacy over any others. If we choose to practice this law faithfully, we will never fall into the sin of favoritism and prejudice. We would care for others irregardless of their ethnicity, social status, income, or any other criteria we use to judge one another.

The second point to know about this royal command is:

- 'royal command' – God the King modeled unconditional love to us through Jesus

This is a rule that has been revealed to us by God through Jesus. Because of our disobedience towards him God could have used every excuse in the book to deny us true hope. But, he does not do that. Instead, he mercifully sends his own Son to take the burdens of our sins away from us and give us a new life if we choose to follow Jesus. God does not play favoritism; if he did, none of us would qualify. Rather, he chose to love us unconditionally, and because of that he expects his own followers to do the same towards other people.

But, what are the consequences if we do not follow God's royal command to love our neighbors as ourselves?

V. Spiritual Consequences: **We are guilty when we do not love unconditionally.** (verses 10-11)

¹⁰ *And the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as the person who has broken all of God's laws.* ¹¹ *For the same God who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." So if you murder someone, you have broken the entire law, even if you do not commit adultery. (James 2:10-11)*

- Break one law → breaking all of God's laws

In God's eyes no matter if you have been perfect in obeying most of his commands, if you break even just one of his law, you have broken all of the laws.

- Cannot discriminate against someone and still say you are a follower of God

Therefore, we cannot justifiably state that we are believers in God if we are prejudicially looking down upon someone else. According to God, if we cannot love our neighbors as ourselves, then we are as guilty in breaking all of his other laws, including murder and adultery.

- True faith is not selective; instead it is all-embracing

True faith does not mean we can pick and choose which of God's laws we want to follow. God expects us to faithfully obey all of his laws, including loving one's neighbor. You may not be a murderer, but if you

favor someone over another, you are as guilty as a murderer. An active faith embraces; an active faith is inclusive.

Hence, what can we learn in application?

VI. Application: **Our lives must reflect the love of God.** (verses 12-13)

¹² *So whenever you speak, or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law of love, the law that set you free.* ¹³ *For there will be no mercy for you if you have not been merciful to others. But if you have been merciful, then God's mercy toward you will win out over his judgment against you. (James 2:12-13)*

- Mercy from God is only experienced when we are merciful to others

We must reevaluate our lives to see if all of our words and deeds do in fact reflect the law of love that God desires for us to live out. Do we purposefully connect ourselves with those who are just like us? Maybe we honor individuals who talk like us, dress like us, have similar dreams like us. And do we dishonor others because they are polar opposites of us, have different opinions about life, or just because they do not look like us? The advent of the Internet has brought this world much closer than it has ever been, but it has also set up incidents whereby two different parties will have to interact with one another for the first time. This pushes the church into the forefront where we must engage the world in very personal and many times threatening ways because of diverse attitudes and outlook of life. What will the church do? Hopefully the mercy of God will transcend through the community of faith into the world that needs to experience this mercy. We have to be defined as a community of acceptance and involvement. We have to be identified as a community of belonging.

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