



Ed Miller  
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## JAMES 2:1-13

Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be able to be here with you this morning. What a beautiful day. I hope you enjoyed the drive here. I just love this kind of spring weather and it's especially nice when it's on Father's Day or Mother's Day or any other special day like that.

We're going to go back to the book of James. So in between our two studies that Pastor Scott's doing we're going to look at James again. We have finally made it to chapter 2.

You'll remember in chapter 1 that we concluded with James talking about how we relate to one another. He's going to continue that theme today. He's going to talk about how we should not show favoritism. This is not particularly a Father's Day sermon, but I'm going to stop and talk about my parents for a minute because they were an excellent example of what James is talking about in this passage, about not showing favoritism.

Both my mom and dad are gone now, passed away into heaven. But I was blessed to have their example in my life. They were both teachers. They were both very well thought up as teachers. They were excellent at what they did, and particularly the thing that they were noted for was not showing favoritism. They really worked hard at taking each pupil, each student and treating them especially well.

My mom was noted for this and she was a high school teacher. She taught world cultures or world history. She made it a particular point to take the student who was often seen as the "bad kid" or the kid that was the troublemaker that the other teachers had kind of written off, but she would really focus on that student and try to bring out the best in that student.

My dad was an elementary school music teacher. He taught kids to play instruments. God bless him because it takes a lot of patience to teach kids to play an instrument. He had a lot of patience. But he would do the same thing. He would try to discover what the unique aspect that each kid was that wanted to play an instrument. Sometimes he'd move them to a different instrument because he thought they might be better at a wind instrument as opposed to one of the other ones. Sometimes he would move them to percussion because he thought maybe banging was the thing they could do best. But he was good at not showing favoritism and for trying to take each child and bring the best out of that child.

Now when my mom and dad brought that home, they tried to be very fair. It didn't always work so well at home though because they tried so hard to be fair to both my brother and I. They would go to extremes almost and it never seemed to work.

Like Christmas, for instance, my mom and dad would work very hard at making sure we had equal gifts, equal dollar amounts or equal desirability or something like that. But you know what? If you've ever tried that, it really doesn't work. Because you just can't do it. No matter how hard you try, you get something that's of equal value for each kid, each kid's different. So one kid likes what they get, and the other kid doesn't like it. And you try, you try, you try. My parents tried so hard to treat us equally that it actually backfired.

I'm glad that I learned a lesson from that and have been able to teach our kids and teach a lot of kids that I work with about life not being fair. We really can't expect life to be fair. We can't expect that everything's going to come out the way we want it to come out. We really don't want that, do we? Because we really want to be treated as special, each of us as special – equal value, but as special. So I'm going to talk today a lot about that because James talks a lot about that.

Let's look together, shall we, at James 2:1-13. *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.*

We'll just go that far for now. It's very clear teaching on one hand. Don't show favoritism. That makes sense, doesn't it? We know that God does not play favorites.

None of us deserves the grace that God gives us. As we were praying this morning we were reflecting on that a good bit. We do not deserve all that God gives to us. If we had to use riches or our talents or our abilities and try to prove to God that we're worthy, we would fail. We'd fail every time. God does not treat us as we deserve, but He treats each one of us with value. He values each one of us because we're His children. We're the children of God – special, unique, of equal worth. No matter what amount of money we have, no matter what gifts and talents, no matter how famous or not famous we are, we're of equal worth to God.

I think that's very significant teaching for us. It doesn't mean that we're all identical though, does it? Because we're of equal value does not mean we're all identical. That's the beauty of how God views us. He views us as each unique, special, created by Him with various gifts,

personalities, quirks, all kinds of different things. We're all different, we're all unique, but we're all of the same value in God's eyes.

It's a very core principle in the Christian faith, a core doctrine. We're equally loved by God, yet unique and special at the same time.

It amazes me that we continue to struggle then with treating people differently or playing favorites or showing favoritism. We still do that, don't we? I think often the reason we do that is because of what James talked about at the end of chapter 1. He said in James 1:27 that we are *polluted by the world*. Or as the apostle Paul says, *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*.

We're actually polluted by the world more than we tend to think. We have a lot of influences today. The media is extremely powerful in our society today and we're constantly being bombarded by messages, whether it's on our phone or on our TV or out there in the world or the movies or whatever. We're bombarded by these messages. I don't think we're often aware enough of how polluted we are.

It's a very strong word – polluted. But polluted is the idea that there's something in the air that's not good for us and we're breathing it and we're not even always aware that we're breathing it. But we're breathing things in the air of our society that are not good for us and they tend to cause us to treat people differently.

Why do we do that? What are some of the effects that we find? Well I think more than we think we actually value certain things more highly than others. Some of us value money more than other things. Some of us value fame or attention. We value various things in our lives and our culture tells us to value certain things. Our culture says value fame, value wealth, value education, value status. There are other things that our culture tells us to value where, again as God's word says, those things are not of the greatest value.

We also tend to covet things of other people, don't we? Our world is very good out there at coveting. People are always comparing themselves. "He has a better car than I do." "His house is nicer than my house." "His family seems nicer than my family." Whatever it might be. "His job – what a job he's or she's got." I think we're polluted often by those thoughts that are coming in and inadvertently we start to believe some of that.

Then oftentimes I think we treat other people as different because we sometimes feel better about ourselves when we're in the presence of certain kinds of people. I speak to myself in this. I had to really wrestle with this over the last couple weeks.

My struggle is not really with people with wealth or great education or anything like that, but I tend to be infected, I would say, by our culture's focus on fame, especially with different sports celebrities. I tend to love sports. I enjoy watching sports and my temptation is to value those athletes more highly.

We had the privilege, you may have heard, a couple weeks ago of going to Yankees Stadium. Scott and Joanne did a parenting workshop for the New York Yankees, some of the players, their wives. That was a struggle for me actually. I had to really work that through.

In our staff meetings we were kidding around about some of it, but I actually had to wrestle with some idolatry in my life. I have this sermon here and I'm getting ready to preach about favoritism and I'm thinking, "Why am I so excited about this, about meeting some of these famous baseball players? Why am I so excited about it?" And I said, "Hmm. Maybe I actually am treating them as different and special in a way that I should not be." So I really prayed through this a lot and worked it through.

I went to this event and we found as we interacted with these folks that they're just like us. They're just regular people. The ones who came are parents. They're raising kids. Their kids don't listen to them. Their kids throw fits. In their case, many of these baseball players' wives are like single parents most of the time. They're on the road. They have all the same challenges we do. They're just like us. Why are they special? Why do I think of them as special? Well, I'm polluted by the world a bit I think. I have to see them as just regular people, just like us.

So let's look at more of what James has to say. He says don't treat anybody as special, really. Don't show favoritism. Again, that does not mean that we don't treat people with the unique gifts that they have.

So the answer to the question, "Do we treat people as special? Do we treat everybody the same?" is yes and no. No, we don't treat everybody as different because we're all in God's eyes equal on the one hand. But on the other hand we're all different. So the answer is yes and no.

One of the things that I love about the ministry that we're involved in with parents is one of the subjects that we teach on is honor. Scott and Joanne did some significant research out of the scripture on the concept on honor. I have a seminar that I present now too called "Honor: The Secret Ingredient to Family Life." Scott and Joanne do that also.

I love this concept of honor and they've created a definition. The first part of that of honor is treating people as special. Treating people as special. I love that. It's something that I've really worked on in my life. Treating other people as special. We're all special in different ways, aren't we?

For me one of the most helpful things that I found in treating people as special is Gary Chapman's *5 Love Languages*. You may be familiar with that. There's several versions of the book applied to various things now. But that's been tremendously helpful. I think I've mentioned it before. Learning another person's love language is a way to treat them as special.

When Joanne and I were first married my love language is receiving gifts. I like to be given gifts. Hers is not. Well I was giving her gifts all the time. So on birthdays, anniversaries I was giving her gifts and flowers and chocolate and all this stuff. She was kind of like "Eh." I could not figure out what was going on for a while. That's what I'm supposed to do, right?

Well, her love language is acts of service. For instance, I have to really work at cleaning the house up when she comes back. Try to have the carpet swept, vacuumed, things like that. Those are the things that make the difference for my wife.

I treat her as special because she's unique and special in God's eyes. Is she of greater value than anyone else? No. We're all equal in God's eyes in that sense in terms of our value. But we need to treat each other as special, whether rich or poor, wealthy, famous, not famous, educated, not educated – God has made us each unique and special.

Let's talk a little bit about this idea of rich and poor now. Because James talks about it. Not an easy subject to talk about. One of the three subjects we don't talk about in our society today – religion, money, and politics. Subjects we don't in our society talk about very easily, but I think a subject we need to talk about because James is talking about it here.

Let me read this part of the passage again for us and let's see what 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? 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?*

Let's talk about this story. He's telling us a story of a gathering of believers of some kind. We don't know exactly what kind of gathering this was, but some kind of gathering of believers. He says a very poor person comes in who's not dressed well is not treated the same as the person who comes in who's wealthy, dressed in very fine clothes. One is told to sit over there and the other one says here's a first row seat for you. So they're treated differently.

Then he goes on to say that is not right. If we're Christians, if we're people that believe in Jesus we can't treat people like that. Why is it that we don't treat people like that? That's because of what we already talked about.

But let's talk about another way that I think we're polluted by the world. We can very easily bring our modern mindset to the scriptures without looking at the context that the scripture is written to. Does all scripture apply to us today? It certainly does. Indeed it does. But we need to understand the context. Who is James writing to, and what are they dealing with in their society and their life right now if we're to apply this adequately.

I think we are indoctrinated in America today by the American dream. There's a lot of really good and positive things about that. But it also has kind of a negative side to it at times.

The American dream is what? If you work hard enough you can do anything you want. You can make it in society, you can make it in the world if you just work hard because America is the land of opportunity. We're rugged individualists and if we just put our mind to it we can make it.

I think we actually know as well that that doesn't always hold true. Just look at the last five, six years – the economic situation that we've dealt with. Many people who have worked hard all

their lives lost their jobs, lost their homes due to no fault of their own. Is there fault sometimes on somebody's part? Yes, certainly there is. There are lazy people in the world and there are people who make bad decisions, get into bad situations. But many times the American dream doesn't work, especially when the economy collapses as it did. People are in trouble and it's not their fault particularly.

What this does to us, I think, is it actually pollutes our mind into thinking differently about the poor than we should. We tend to think in America that the poor are poor because they're lazy. They don't work very hard. They don't deserve anything because they haven't achieved it, they haven't accomplished it. Because in America we can do anything. We know that's not true. But I think there's a mindset, a bias towards the poor in our lives often. We think of them as less worthy.

Let's look at James and the early church for a minute. You'll remember when we looked at chapter 1 that we talked about the situation that James was writing into. He was writing to a church that was persecuted and scattered. They were being severely persecuted at the time of James' writing. Many of them had lost everything. They had lost their homes because they had to flee Jerusalem. They had to get out and they went wherever they could and they tried to get away. Even there they were still persecuted. So the church as a whole, many of the believers, were poor. They had lost a lot. They had gone through like many people went through in this recession. They had lost everything because of their faith. They were poor.

Now many of the young believers coming into the church were poor as well because it was these now poor believers, persecuted believers that were sharing their faith (secretly, in many cases), but sharing their faith and those who were coming to faith many of them were poor. It was the religious leadership who still had all of their wealth. They were the ones that were sitting pretty, persecuting the church. So that's why James tells us here – Aren't the rich the ones that are persecuting you? Aren't the rich the ones that are *dragging you to court*? Aren't the rich the ones that we should be looking down at because of that? That's the context that we're looking at. We're looking at a lot of Christians who were poor at that point.

Now James makes a particular point about looking at the poor and the rich and he categorizes them in a way that I think is often hard for us to think about today because of our mindset. Basically he says shouldn't the poor be looked at as special in a certain sense because they have a greater likelihood or opportunity of having strong faith. I don't think he's really saying that either.

In reality, when you are poor, when you don't have as much, and if you've ever been to the third world you really know this there, if you've been on a missions trip or anything like that, you see when people don't have as much it's an amazing thing because they're not encumbered the way we are sometimes.

We have a lot and we have a lot of things that we have to manage and we have a lot of things that can go wrong in our lives with our cars and our homes and all these other things that we have. We get encumbered by these. So in a sense, when we're rich we can tend to put our faith in those things rather than in God Himself. We can tend to put our faith in the things that we have.



We can tend to put our faith in the education that we have. We can tend to put our faith in our wealth.

When we're not in that status, when we're poor, we don't have much, faith comes a little easier because we're not encumbered by those other things. We're not able to put our faith in things and material things, in wealth, in status, in our education.

I think that's what we're seeing here. God has chosen those who are poor to be rich in faith. The reality is those who are poor do tend to have simpler, more genuine faith in God because when we're rich, when we have a lot we can tend to very much rely on those things.

I heard someone speak once and he said that if you live in America you're rich. Not sure I agree with that. But it sure did get me thinking. He said you're rich because you have choices. In America most of us have choices. He was saying that compared to much of the rest of the world we have choices. Even when we lose our job most of us have some place we can go – friends, family, another place we can borrow money. We have other options. We can get the resources that we need. I don't totally agree with it because I don't think it's totally true either. Some people in our country don't have options.

But I think most of us here should consider ourselves rich and thus we have to be on guard. We have to be on guard against relying upon those things that we have. We need to be like those who are poor and we have simple faith in God and not in things.

We also need to be on guard against showing favoritism to those who do have a lot. I mentioned my struggle with that, but I think we each have a unique struggle. Each of us are different in that sense what we struggle with.

I don't know too many of us here in this room who are filthy rich. I don't know everything about everybody, but I don't think so. We're not in the level of folks who really have to wrestle with that, so we tend to say, "Well I'm not filthy rich. I don't have to worry about that too much." I think each of us should examine are there areas in our life that we tend to put our faith in things other than the Lord? We tend to put our faith in something other than the Lord. I'm sure every one of us can identify something like that. For me, as I mentioned, health. Ah yes. Lots of different things like that. Sometimes we put our faith in other things where it really only belongs in the Lord.

I was preparing this sermon and some of you may have even seen my little Facebook post while I was studying. I said, "Baseball keeps intruding on my studies." This is one of my favorite times of the year for baseball because I coach Little League. Some of our all-star team has just formed and so it's a really exciting time, meeting new kids, thinking about the possibilities. We haven't lost yet, so everything's rosy. It's like the beginning of any season – before you've lost, the sky's the limit, you think great things. I love brainstorming about my team and thinking about what players are going to play what positions.

Baseball for me, I could walk a very fine line between finding too much joy in baseball. I really can. So preparing this sermon, I caught myself. If you notice on Facebook one of my slightly

sarcastic friends said, “Ah. Your idol.” And I said, “Ooh.” There’s a tendency which I can put too much emphasis on that in my life. Thus I can also put too much emphasis on famous baseball players and such.

We each have something in our life where we have a temptation or a tendency to rely too heavily on that and not enough in the Lord. I think maybe we each have an arena where we’re tempted to play favorites in one way or another. I think what is a temptation for you may not be a temptation for me.

I’d like us to take just a couple minutes now and we’re going to just be quiet again. I’d like you each to reflect on an area that you may be tempted to play favorites and an area that you may be tempted to have faith in that thing or that part of your life rather than in the Lord. Let’s do that. Let’s just have a quiet time to reflect.

[PRAYER] Lord, I thank you again for your word, that you teach us and show us that you don’t show favoritism. Lord, we’re undeserving of all that you shower upon us, all of the grace and the mercy you give us. We are undeserving. Yet you love us and value us as we are. You value each of us equally. You demonstrate what a true Father is and we’re grateful for that example. We also know that we are polluted by the world. We breathe the air that everyone else breathes and some of that air doesn’t have great stuff in it. So we can ingest that and we need to examine our lives and find out whether there are ways that we’re putting faith in other things that we shouldn’t be. We want to put our faith in you for all of our blessings in life, for guidance in every area of our life, for our value and our worth. We want to put it in you and let you be our defining factor. Father, we don’t want to show favoritism to those as we see James talking about here. We want to treat people as special but all as equal in your eyes. We ask your help to do that, Lord, as we continue to grow as a body, as we continue to grow as a family. Would you help us to live that out day to day as we interact with each other, with our families back home, with our neighbors, with our friends at work. Would you help us to treat people in the way that you instruct us to treat them – with value and as unique and special. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.