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James 2:1-10, 14-18
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“James and the Giant Teach(ing)”

Grace and peace...

The Book of James has been called “the Proverbs of the New Testament.” That is to say, it’s practical. It gives us the wisdom of what the Christian life should look like. Some people think James is all law because of lines like this: “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires” (1:19). But James has Gospel too. “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him” (1:12). James provides the guide of what living out our faith should look like. He isn’t telling us how to become a Christian, but he is telling us how to live like one. So it’s a very helpful book—it’s also a very early book. We think this book was written somewhere between 44-49 AD. That’s before Paul wrote any of his letters. And let’s not forget who James is! This James was Jesus’ half-brother. This James was not one of the 12 Disciples. James went from being Jesus’ brother to being a brother in Christ! James went from not believing in Jesus at all to becoming a leader of the early church who presides in Jerusalem over the first ever church

council! He really is a giant figure—I fear though we’ve lost sight of him a little, so today we are going to look at him and what he taught. The title of this sermon is “James and the Giant Teach(ing).”

That giant teaching is this: how we treat our neighbor is a direct reflection of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Depending on how you are doing in that regard of loving everyone, all the time, that giant teaching either encourages you or concerns you. Our faith in Jesus is meant to be lived out with consistency and without impartiality. James reminds us being a follower of Jesus is not just what we believe, but in what we do. It’s a vital and powerful combination—faith and works go together!

To the text in verse one: “So my brothers [and sisters] show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (v. 1). He sets up this scenario: a guy in nice clothes and a gold ring comes to church one day, as does a poor man in shoddy clothing—they should be given the same spot to sit. If you don’t think so, that’s favoritism, that’s impartiality, and that’s forbidden. If we treat people differently, James says we’ve become “judges with evil thoughts” (v. 4). Someone always loses out. What does favoritism look like? Here’s a picture for you.

[BIRD feeding]. It says at the bottom—favoritism: the only people who say it doesn't exist are the ones getting it. Maybe you can relate to that bird getting stepped on...the world may operate that way, but not so the church, says James. That's not the way of Jesus. Besides his point is, look, the poor aren't giving you any grief. It's the rich and powerful who are oppressing you and dragging you into court (v. 6). So all the more reason to honor the poor man. Verse 5, "Listen my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?" See, in a lot of instances, especially in other countries, the poor seem happier than the rich. If they have their basic needs met, they don't need all the things of excess. They have each other! They have faith in the Lord Jesus! And that's enough. But it's the rich who seem worried and hurried. They seem unhappy. We are to love both the rich and poor, for sure, but James point is the poor have a lot to give when it comes to faith. They are often rich in it. So we see here that there's nothing partial about the law of impartiality. Love everyone the same, regardless of their status or possessions. Everyone is equal in terms of dignity and worth—why? Because God makes it so! They bear the image of God!

Verse 8, "If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" you are doing well. Well, that just seems like

an understatement to me. Driving down Eagle and making all the greens is doing well. Going to Costco and not spending more than \$100 is doing well. But loving your neighbor as yourself, that's excellent beyond excellent! It's one commandment, the whole second table of the law, all summed up for us. Just do that, James says. Aim there. In actuality, instead of confidently doing well, it's more like we have an excuse, "Well..." because we aren't loving our neighbor perfectly. James goes even further to say, "If you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point, has become accountable for all of it (v. 10). I added that verse for us in the reading—they left it out of the lectionary, but I thought it would be good to show James never thought salvation could come through obedience of the law, that is through works. He never said that.

You may know that Luther never liked the book of James. He called it an epistle of straw. I have to be honest and say, I think Luther was reacting to something that James never said. Luther gave the straw man argument to the epistle of straw. I think that's unfortunate, because there's nothing contradictory here, just complimentary. We do have this wonderful statement from Luther about how good works proceed from faith, "Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone!" But part of Luther's heartburn over the matter was how James talked

about faith. James uses the word “pistis” which is the word for faith, but he is using it in a different way than Paul did. To James, faith doesn’t mean what you believe in or put your hope in. Faith means knowledge and awareness of the Lord. Faith is just an intellectual exercise. That’s the way James is treating faith here. Paul treat faith as a matter of the heart. Luther does too. And well they should. But James is treating faith as a matter of the head. It’s cognitive. That’s different. And in discipling, we focus on three areas—head, heart and hands. That’s something to lock in. We need them all, but they do different things.

Verse 14, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” The answer James is getting at is no. I want you to hear what he means though. If someone has the head, but doesn’t have the hands, is that good enough? No! Look at v. 15, “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things they need for the body itself, what good is that?” So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” In other words, “head knowledge” without the “hands working” is not what being a Christian is about. How could someone say such a thing? Go in peace, be well, without doing anything to help them? They aren’t loving. They aren’t using their hearts to love their neighbor.

James is like Mr. Rogers. I wish he were like Roald Dahl, it would have fit better, but he's like Mr. Rogers in that James is pleading for people to see everyone as their neighbor. "Won't you be, won't you be, please won't you be my neighbor?" How? James wants every believer to love their neighbor as themselves. This letter James penned is an invitation to help the follower of Christ know two things—that they're loved and they're capable of loving. Think how important that is! The ability to love unconditionally and deeply is a gift of God. It doesn't come from us. It comes from the faith God gives us. It comes from a transformed heart. Instead of the cognitive exercise, the head knowledge endeavors only, James says, "You have fun with that. You show me your faith apart from works. But as for me, "I will show you my faith by my works because that's how it goes." (v. 18). James, as well as his older brother Jesus, wants love to be the motivation and the expression.

So, on this Labor Day weekend, it's a time for a labor of love. We have a lot of people to love. But we also have a lot of people who are capable of loving. What will you do for someone this week because you believe? The answer will vary as much as the needs, but the deeds that count will be the ones expressed in love.

In Jesus' name, Amen.