

# James 2:1-13

Pentecost 15, Supplement Series C, August 28, 2016

Theme: Speak and act as those who will be judged

- I. Either by the law that has no mercy
- II. Or by the law that gives freedom

INJ “Don’t show favoritism.” Ok. I don’t show favoritism. I talk to all kinds of people. I treat everyone fairly. So, I don’t have to listen to the sermon today. Got it. Done.

“Don’t show favoritism.” Wait a minute. What kind of favoritism are you talking about? Because I do have a favorite friend. Some people like the same things I do. We are the same age so we hang out more. Is that wrong? You can’t tell me God is opposed to friends! I know he isn’t, because he says to be kind and encouraging and helpful and that is what friends are. I consider my friends to be gifts from God, so what does that have to do with favoritism?

See, I listened to that reading from the Letter of James. He gave that example of two people coming to church. One was wealthy and the other was poor. Going gaga over the rich one is a disgusting display of favoritism! It is as if they were more interested in the offerings that would be given than the sinner who needs a Savior. And that poor person didn’t get any attention. Doesn’t he have sin that needs forgiveness? Of course he does. Favoritism like that is obviously sinful. But I don’t do that.

While I don’t show favoritism, I can see James’ point about people. It is easy to judge based on outward appearances. I want to be the friend of someone who seems influential and popular. Less so, someone who is having a tough time. And at church it is especially important not to show favoritism. In James’ example, both the rich and the poor person came to hear about Jesus the Savior. They should both be convicted of sin and assured of forgiveness. The heart matters, not the outward appearance.

“Don’t show favoritism.” Maybe we should look at how God treats us without favoritism. What we brought to the table were sins and corruption and rebellion. We are poor, miserable sinners, and God did not ignore us. He did not send us to the back of the room, relegated to the bottom rung. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” to us. God became fully human, taking on our flesh, humbling himself to poverty and shame. Jesus carried our burdens and suffered temptation just as we do. Yet he never sinned. In an amazing display of grace God declares

Jesus’ holiness to be ours. He laid all our guilt on him. Jesus paid for it completely by his suffering and death. We poor miserable sinners, are forgiven. We poor miserable sinners, are heirs of heaven. God showed mercy, not favoritism. We should do that, too!

“Don’t show favoritism.” I guess it is difficult to avoid favoritism in our dealings with people, isn’t it? Even at church. We think that those who have much will be able to benefit our congregation more than those who have less. We think that people with connections will be able to get us things we might not have had. So we cater to their whims and we pursue their desires. Maybe it isn’t money that is the trigger. Is it because that person is related to us? Or, we have known them for a long time? So we treat them differently – maybe I do show favoritism sometimes!

But my favoritism isn’t that bad, right? I am not trying to judge hearts. It is just hard to look at people as sinners who need a Savior. Every day I try to do what God wants me to do. Didn’t he say, “Love your neighbor as yourself”? I remember the Commandments. They say things like, don’t kill. Don’t steal. Don’t commit adultery. Do honor your parents and those in authority. Pretty much, I try to keep those commandments!

“Don’t show favoritism.” Oh, what you are saying is that there isn’t a prize for getting close. When God commands that we do or don’t do something, either we do it or we don’t. If we disobey, even in our thoughts or words, we have sinned. We can think of God’s laws as one giant balloon. God tolerates no disobedience. If you prick the balloon at any point – pop!

“Bang!” I broke God’s law. Sometimes I show favoritism. Other times I dishonor parents and government. And I hurt people by my words and actions. And lust is never far away. Speaking disparagingly about others? And the desires of my heart are thoroughly corrupt. Even though I try hard, I don’t make it to perfection. Even though I don’t look like a criminal, I have sinned. Despite all my protests otherwise, I have violated God’s law. Even my trying to wiggle out of it adds to my guilt.

And that law of God is merciless! I remember memorizing the passage from our lesson: “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” If you or I want to defend ourselves and make ourselves look better, the law does not give us room to do it! At every turn it exposes our failure to be holy. It penetrates our hearts and minds and uncovers guilt we didn’t even know was there! The law has no mercy.

God is clear about what happens to violators. “The wages of sin is death.” We have earned hell by our rebellion. It doesn’t matter if there is a boatload of evil in our experience or one single infraction. (And all of

us have boatloads of sin, right?) The law of God has no mercy. It only condemns. It only crushes. It only accuses. Me.

And we cannot escape its reach, can we? There is a reaction that is obvious when other people have it. When God's law judges sin and lays on guilt, some resist the label of "sinner." They attack anyone who says they are wrong. "Don't judge me!" is the cry they shout. "Don't judge me for engaging in wickedness. Don't judge me to be a sinner. Just let me be whatever I want to be!"

If we are honest, one of those lives inside each of us. I know it does inside me. I complain that it isn't fair. Just because I did it doesn't mean I am wicked! I try to be nice. I do my best. Why isn't that good enough? There it stands, immovable. "Don't show favoritism." God's law has no mercy. I am judged. There can be no avoiding it. My words and my actions prove me guilty. I am a sinner.

Now I don't want to go home so quickly. Remember how sure I was at first that I didn't have sin to be concerned about? Now, that I am condemned by the law, what should I do?

Let's look again at God's Word. What does James say to us in our woeful condition? Right there at the very beginning of the reading – did you notice that before? "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ..." Being connected to Jesus is not a dreary and burdensome life. He has something glorious to say to us!

Do you know what that glorious thing is? It is that God did not let that merciless law have the final word. Jesus entered our humanity to obey the law completely and without blemish. The law cannot condemn him! And it no longer will condemn us because he has credited us with his own righteousness! We poor miserable sinners are declared not guilty of sin. God did not show favoritism. He declared all the world to be justified by the blood of Christ shed on the cross.

God got personal about it, too. He spoke his name over you at your baptism. There, with simple water and powerful word, God snatched you from the death of sin and gave you a new life, the life of faith in your glorious Lord Jesus Christ. God did the miracle, making you an heir of heaven instead of a child of hell. It is all yours in Christ Jesus. You are no longer poor, but rich. You have every promise of God and depend on them each day. I am rich! Baptized into Christ I have freedom from death.

Freedom is what James calls it in our reading today. "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom." The law that gives freedom is the precious news of Jesus who was perfect for us. It is the good news that his innocent death on the cross

forgives our sin. The law that gives freedom is the name of Jesus spoken over us at baptism. It is the assurance that we have peace with God given in the Lord's Supper. Every time you and I hear the words of the promise, we are invigorated with the freedom Jesus provides. We don't usually call it a "law of freedom" but that is what it does. The gospel gives us freedom from sin and death and guilt and condemnation. God's mercy triumphs over any judgment the law without mercy attempts to declare.

"Don't show favoritism." Rather than try to avoid God's Word, now we offer a prayer: "Lord, I confess that I have shown favoritism many times, often unintentionally. Forgive me for Jesus sake, and wash me clean of all my guilt. Then, Lord, move me to speak and to act in the freedom you have given me. Let me be kind and compassionate. Help me see souls who need Jesus rather than the outward trappings of poor or rich or related or unfamiliar. Lord, give me a heart that is not proud or self-centered, but one that shows mercy to all."

I guess I did need to listen to this Bible reading, this sermon about favoritism. When I think about favoritism, I make judgments about people all the time. Are they friendly? Helpful? Grumpy? When I let those things get in the way of a sinner's need for a Savior, I need to repent! Jesus assures me of his merciful forgiveness. Freedom from guilt and fear!

An even more interesting thought is that other people are always judging me. What do they – you – see in me? Someone who is working the system to get the most out of it? I hope not. I hope you see me as someone determined to live as a forgiven child of God. Someone who rejoices in the freedom of God's peace. Who is connected to God's powerful proclamation of mercy in Christ Jesus. Who wants as many people as possible to know the Savior who has set me free.

Isn't that the main point of this reading in the Letter of James? It isn't so much about the law that condemns, the law that forbids showing favoritism – because all our speaking and acting judged by the law that has no mercy results in condemnation!

The main point of our lesson is that we have been freed from the condemnation of the law. God has set us free in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. Everything we say and do shows how merciful he is. When you see me and when I see you, the gospel shines forth! God has judged us to be heirs of heaven and his dear children. James leaves us with this encouragement: "Brothers and sisters, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ ... speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom... Mercy triumphs over judgment." SDG Amen.