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*Class Dismissed*

A sermon on James 2:1-10, 14-17

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Does anybody here have a brother or a sister? Or are you good friends with someone who does? Or do you have more than one child? Isn't it amazing how DIFFERENT two siblings can be? When my husband, Rod, was growing up, he and his younger brother Russ, didn't play together much, because their interests were so different. Rod always played sports, and even today, he's a fan of just about anything involving a ball, no matter what shape or size—doesn't matter if it's professional, college, high school, or little league—he's even been known to take his wife to the local college volleyball game while out of town on vacation, because why not? Russ, on the other hand, had no interest in sports—he would far rather spend that time working with horses and all the equipment that comes with them, something Rod has zero desire to do. Both men have an entrepreneurial spirit, but whereas Rod specializes in mid-century modern furniture, Russ is the R in R Bar B Saddle, Tack, and Trailer. Two men with very different interests, yet they're definitely related.

Pat Yancey started us off on our journey through the New Testament book of James last week. We'll be hearing from selected passages from this famous and challenging letter all through the rest of September. The title of Pat's sermon was

“When All Else Fails, Read the Directions.” As Pat pointed out, one of the instructions James gives in his letter to early Christians was to “remember who and whose you are.” God is the Father and Mother of us all, and that means, hey! We’re all related, no matter how different we are.

In this letter, James refers to his readers as “my brothers and sisters,” or, alternatively, “my beloved,” or “my beloved brothers and sisters.” He uses these wonderful terms of endearment as he works to set them straight, kind of like a mom or dad when they take their naughty child aside and say, “Sweetheart, you cannot hit your sister.” None of us likes to hear where we fall short, but it sure is easier if it’s spoken out of love, and that’s how James is talking to these believers, and to us.

James is also reminding us that we’re RELATED as he brings up the topic of how we treat the rich and the poor. You’ll notice that nowhere in this passage does James shame anyone for actually BEING rich, or BEING poor. Very important that we hear this. He’s concerned with how easy it is to fall into favoring the rich among us, and dismissing the poor, because that’s what the world teaches us to do. After all, isn’t it the rich who have the most to give? Aren’t they the ones who can invest in our businesses, help fund our non-profits, maybe give us a job? Aren’t they the ones who make sure we have museums and symphonies?

(Conventional Wisdom says) The poor—they don't give things, they NEED things. We get a little anxious when we see them coming.

James says, don't forget that rich people also have the power to hurt as well as help, and the poor often have a richness of faith that those with more means would **do well** to learn from. The rich are not potential patrons, and the poor are not potential problems. There are only brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Speaking of doing well . . . James reminds us that doing well means loving our neighbors as ourselves. If we're partial to our rich members and guests, we're not loving our neighbors as ourselves. And that is just as much of a sin as cheating on our spouse or drinking and driving or stealing.

James insists that our faith must be expressed not just in praying the Lord's Prayer and saying the Apostles' Creed, but in how we give and how we treat people.

You can tell everybody you're a runner, you can wear some high-dollar running shoes and read running magazines and post pictures of yourself on Instagram in your running gear, but if you don't actually spend time running, you are not a runner. Nor are we Christians if we don't actively and practically love our neighbors.

Now, we already know this. Many of us already hold these values very near and dear to our hearts. We know it's important to treat each person as a child of

God, we know it's important to give of our time, talent, and treasure as we are able. This is not news.

So, a passage like this one is an opportunity to ask some questions. First, how are we doing at loving our neighbor, especially our neighbor who has less than we do? We take a lot of pride in treating people equally, but sometimes our tendency to play favorites creeps up on us, and catches us unaware.

I remember one time, nearly two decades ago, before I became a pastor, I was teaching a Sunday School class for 5 or 6 young couples at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas. One of them had the bright idea of naming our class "The Ark," because we came two by two. We studied the Bible, and practiced the spiritual disciplines together, and as a class, we even adopted a family for Christmas. We marveled that the mother of the family we adopted had requested an iron for her Christmas gift, and we felt really good about getting one for her. We had at least two or three dinner gatherings in each other's homes.

One day one of the women suggested that all of us gals should start getting together and going out to lunch. The woman from one of the newer couples in our group got a little quiet, but later on, she emailed and asked, could we also do some things that didn't involve spending quite so much money. And then we realized she didn't have the money to make going out to lunch a regular part of her life. It's been a long time since this happened, but I seem to remember that it was discussed

a little bit. The woman who first made the suggestion of going out to lunch really didn't want to give up on going out to lunch. We talked about offering to pay for those who couldn't afford it, and we talked about coming up with an alternative activity, and while we were busy discussing all of this, the newer couple just quietly stopped attending the class for a while.

That's the part I'll never forget. That someone was brave enough to admit that going out to lunch would be hard for her, and to ask for alternative activities, and that we hemmed and hawed and meant really well, but ultimately we didn't quite rise to the occasion the way I hope we would now, 20 years older and wiser.

Every now and then it doesn't hurt to stop and ask ourselves, do our ministries truly welcome brothers and sisters of all income levels? For example, Dinners for Eight is a wonderful way to get to know people on a more personal level in our church. I always look forward to doing this every year. We should not end this activity. But if you don't have a home with a table and space to host 8 people for dinner, and you don't have money to go out for dinner, it's a little tough to participate. When money is really tight, even a potluck can present a challenge. Are we providing enough alternative, low or no cost opportunities for people to build lasting friendships? Do we have some room to grow in this area? That's one question.

Another question might be, what if we just don't KNOW any brothers and sisters who are in need? Nobody would refuse to share their food with someone we knew was hungry, but some of us rarely encounter a truly hungry person in our day to day lives, or when we do, we don't recognize it. I say this knowing that there are brothers and sisters in this church who see heartbreaking human need every day because of your jobs, or where you live. But for others, it's just too easy to drive from home to wherever to wherever and not really have to see anything too challenging. . . What, if any, responsibility do we have for getting out of our bubbles?

[During the same time period that I was teaching the young couples class at Village Church, I also had a job at Central Baptist Seminary. So for one year I drove to work from Leawood, KS to Kansas City, KS. I would start at my house in Johnson County and drive past Town Center Plaza, packed with high-end shops, and drive along smooth, well-paved, beautifully landscaped roads, past beautiful homes and manicured trails and parks, and as I got further north, the homes would get smaller, and older, and the roads would get a little rougher, and I'd cross the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Expressway, and the stores and some of the homes would have bars over the windows, and I would immediately be greeted by a big sign that said "Wound Care Clinic." It was the easiest thing in the world to go home at the end

of the day, and just block it out, because I didn't live there, or shop there, or go out to eat there.]

[That leads us to] one final question (we could ask more) which is, how is our vision? When we do encounter people who are poor, how do we see them? Are they an object of pity, maybe someone to direct towards the Blessing Box, or are they brothers and sisters with gifts to share? When we encounter people who are rich, how do we treat them? Have we ever found ourselves speaking more carefully around someone who is rich because we don't want to offend them and risk missing out on a favor, or losing their financial support for something that's important to us? I don't know about you, because you all are pretty awesome, but I have found it's harder than it looks not to play favorites. But when I've done that, it has not felt at all like loving my neighbor.

When we truly love our neighbors, we find that they aren't just neighbors anymore. They are brothers and sisters. And . . . Isn't it amazing how different siblings can be? As the brother of Jesus, James knew a thing or two about brothers being different from each other, yet still related. Differences are always OK—favoring people in one economic class over those in another is not. Brothers and sisters help each other out, in practical ways, like when Russ loans Rod one of his trailers.

I loved the illustration that Pat gave last week about the disaster that happened when his neighbor tried to build a swingset in his garage without reading the instructions first, and when Pat himself tried to put a desk together without reading the instructions first. In both of those situations, people had to go back and redo some of what they'd already done. Which was a warning, but also offered some hope. God is a God of second, and third, and 17<sup>th</sup> chances. Today is another chance to gain expertise in loving our neighbors as ourselves, in learning to see each other as brothers and sisters. If we've blown it in the past, so what. Let's try again. And for heaven's sakes, let's do it together, because as different as we are, we've all got the same parent. And that is enough common ground for anyone.

Let us pray:

*God, you have given each of us gifts beyond measure. Each of us is precious and beloved in your sight. Help us see each person in our family of faith as the brother and sister that they are, and to love them as ourselves. Amen.*