

got a few Lydias, we've got the prison guards, we've got people who aren't sure how they are going to put gas in the car and buy groceries this week. We've got people in different seasons of life, people facing different struggles with sin and sorrow. And that's worth celebrating because that's what the church is supposed to look like.

But the question is, has the gospel reality fully transformed us, or do we still tend toward those old ways of dividing up the world? Do we still find our little group where we mostly socialize with people who look like us, have the same income bracket as us, and people who think like us?

We are people who have been transformed by the good news of the gospel. We have been brought low by the reality that I don't deserve to be here. And neither do you. And yet here we are. The things we believe about God should cause us to see one another differently.

I read a good illustration of this. Arthur Rendle Short who died in 1953, was a well-known evangelical Christian. He was a professor of surgery at Bristol University and a professor at the Royal College of Surgeons.

His son recorded the comments of one of his father's colleagues, not himself a Christian. He asked Short to examine a patient for him, and later commented to this effect: she was an old hag, filthy, smelly and disgusting. "And yet Short treated her like a princess." This is the royal law of love.

It's one thing to tolerate those who are different from us. It's a whole other thing to see in them the 'imago dei' – the image of God. To say to yourself this person is royalty – a child of the King. I better treat them as such.

How do we learn this ethic? How do we put James' teaching into practice? This is what the gospel of grace produces in someone who has been brought low – and who can now say, "That could have been me...but by the grace of God goes I."

This morning, I chose our gathering

song, Come, Christians, Join to Sing, because of one line in particular. Verse 2 says:

Come, lift your hearts on high,  
Alleluia, Amen!

Let praises fill the sky;  
Alleluia, Amen!

He is our Guide and Friend;  
To us He'll condescend;  
His love shall never end,  
Alleluia, Amen!

"To us He'll condescend." That's the good news of the gospel. Christ condescended to us.

I don't know what you've got in your bank account, I don't know how expensive your outfit was, I don't know what career potential you have or what inheritances you have coming your way. What I do know is that none of us have earned heaven. What I do know is that the only hope you have of life after life is all gift, it's all grace, it's all undeserved. And that's the great equalizer.

All I have to hang my hat on is this great truth, "God's mercy triumphs over God's judgement." And that means that in the family of God we're all the same. Sinners in need of mercy. Poor beggars made rich in faith.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

## ***"Faith Works: Levelling"***

*June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: James 2:1-13*

*By Rev. Mike Putnam*

**Y**ou know, James has gumption. He's pretty bold. He's not afraid to say it like it is. That's what dawned on me this week – three weeks into this little book of the Bible that I thought was just full of helpful friendly advice, and it's dawned on me how pastorally fearless James really is.

I mean, James kicks off his little letter by getting right into one of the toughest subjects in faith. "Where is God when I'm facing trials and temptations." "Why am I suffering" is a theological question not for the faint of heart. James tackles it immediately.

Last week James takes a stab at our righteousness. "Don't be right, be righteous," James insists. And do that by "Being quick to listen and slow to speak." And that sounds good. But James doesn't mean just listen to one another – he means listen to God. But don't just listen – do what God says! Don't just come to church, hear a good sermon and go on living your life as you did before. Put God's word into practice!

And then this week, James is on about the well-to-do who come to church. "Don't show favoritism." Don't be impressed by status, wealth or privilege. Remember, you are people of the gospel!

I mean, I get it. He's not wrong about any of this stuff. But he's fearless. He's going to ruffle some feathers here. In every church since the dawn of time, people want to come, be given a little spiritual nugget, impart a little religious wisdom and head home to live our real lives.

But James is challenging us. He's getting at some of the toughest stuff of faith. He's not just letting us express our faith however we want, he's demanding, he's getting right to the hard stuff, he's being bold in his ministry to us.

And this morning James is teaching us yet another lesson that is bound to get our dander up. But it's not new, it goes all the way back in the Old Testament. Remember Saul looking for the next king of Israel? Having passed over all of the

sons of Jesse he says, "The Lord sees not as a man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

But see, that's all well and good. That's a nice lesson. God's concern isn't with how you dress or what you do for a living, God's concern is what's in your heart. And Jesus is our heart surgeon. He's come to fix the things that are wrong in us through his Holy Word.

But this morning James is going to take that nice lesson (don't judge on outward appearance) and he's going to bring it home to your pew. Don't get all impressed by the type of people who come to your church. James gives us a little case study – a scenario that could well play out in any great cathedral or any little country church around the world.

James is calling attention to the preferential treatment being given to certain people. Someone comes in wearing gold rings and a fine white toga and everyone jumps around and says, "Here, sit here." "Get up, get out of your seat, let Mr. and Mrs. So and So sit there." And then someone comes in in rags. "What are you doing here, who let you in? Sit over there, sit over there next to Gary Jackson."

I wish I could say this was just a first-century problem. We've evolved passed all this nonsense. We're not like this anymore. Give it time, eventually all the problems of the world will work themselves out. We're naturally getting better and better, you know.

I was shocked to hear that down at the high school these days kids are calling other kids the "N" word. Racial slurs! It's 2024 for heaven's sake! Aren't we passed all that? What are they teaching the kids these days – aren't they teaching them to love not to hate? Aren't we making progress after all these years?

But see, the problem isn't a lack of curriculum, or a lack of evolution. The problem is, and always has been and always will be, the human heart.

But so often when these issues arise, we have a kind of knee jerk response, don't we.

“Everyone is the same” we proclaim. “There’s no difference at all.” Just treat everyone the same. But that’s not quite right, either.

Biblical Scholar, J.A. Motyer, helpfully explains, “The Bible is too courteous a book to allow us to lack proper respect for people to whom respect is due.”

The Bible doesn’t say everyone is the same because our cultures obsession with inclusivity, equality and affirmative action doesn’t always leave us satisfied. So, Bible shows deference to all kinds of people for all kinds of reasons. And so, it’s perfectly fine that a young boy might be asked to give up his seat and sit on the floor so that Mrs. Thomlison can sit down. That’s not equality – but I doubt anyone would say it’s not right.

If the Prime minister were to come to our service this morning (regardless of what you think of his politics) none of us would be surprised if there was special preparation for the location of his seat and for his security. We might even honour him in the sanctuary because of his role in our nation. I doubt many would object even if we are showing respect to one person over all the others.

And we don’t need to pretend that there’s no difference between doctors and nurses, teachers and E.A.’s, ministers and lay preachers. What’s the difference? Qualification. Scope of practice. Expectation. Not exactly the same – but differently qualified – and therefore worthy of respect.

Respect should be given where respect is due. But what James is saying is that wealth in and of itself does not deserve honour. James is saying that we can’t combine snobbery with faith in Jesus. James is commanding us, “Don’t show favoritism”.

But James’ argument for this change in thinking is not based on anything other than very Christian foundational beliefs. It’s not that “all people are equal” and “human rights,” and “Can’t we all just get along.” No, James argues against favoritism based on the gospel. James’ call to live differently is tied directly to the core things we believe about Jesus. And that’s an important distinction – because secular reasons for equality never seem to get us very far.

Look at the very first line of the chapter: “My brothers and sisters, believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the first part of the Christian gospel. On what basis are these people James’ family – his brothers and sister? On the basis of their faith alone. They have been baptized and born again into a new family.

And the one who deserves our worship and admiration – “the glorious Lord Jesus Christ” – is not a king of pomp and circumstance, but a king of modesty and righteousness – even as he heralds the title “King of King, Lord of Lords, the Alpha and the Omega.

And our claim to citizenship in this eternal kingdom has nothing to do with our status or wealth. It’s not because of any biological or genetic predisposition. It’s based entirely on what has happened in us because the gospel truth got a hold of us.

A believer is someone able to look back to a time in their life where they moved from a state of unbelief to a state of belief. And this changed their status not by their accomplishment but by the grace of God. Paul says, “...not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:9).

Next 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 to those who love him?”

Again, James is reiterating that our membership in the family of God is not of our doing, but it was a work of God in us. Our citizenship in his eternal kingdom wasn’t earned but it was a gift. And this humbles us! It forces us to contend with the reality that we are unworthy and yet we’re in!

Next, James says, “If you keep the royal law found in scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and convicted by the law as a law breaker.”

Anyone here ever show favoritism? Anyone here ever broken the law of God? You realize that exempts you for your status in the Kingdom of God, right? Anything short of perfect righteousness is intolerable to our Holy God. You

realize that your claim to eternal life is null and void.

But James concludes with these words: “Mercy triumphs over judgement.” God’s grace wins the day. Jesus’ cross, the empty tomb, the ascension into heaven to intercede for us at the right hand of God is God’s definitive and merciful answer to our sin problem. We want to say that our sin is no big deal. It’s a big deal! But it’s not the final word about us.

This is the gospel. We have been adopted into the family of God; we have been chosen to be citizens in the kingdom of God. But because of our sin we have no right to that status. Because of our heart dysfunctions we have been disqualified. And yet, because of Jesus, we are counted righteous in the eyes of God, despite our sin. And, the final word about the matter is that God’s “Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Now, says James, in light of all of that theology, let’s talk about your little problem of favoritism. Let’s talk about how your heart wants to elevate certain people who are impressive, or rich or well-dressed above everyone else. In light of the gospel that behaviour makes no sense at all.

And so, in the early church we find all kinds of examples of rich and poor, impressive and unimpressive living together in faith. We see the church breaking all the social rules because of the core things we believe about Jesus.

In Acts 16 we have the story of Lydia, a wealthy business woman, who is seeking for the things of God. Luke tells us that Paul told her the gospel, and she became a “believer”. And as a result, her home became a centre for evangelism and for gospel work – she opened up her resources for the work of God in her community.

And then, in the very next section of that chapter in Acts we’re told about a jailer who makes the same shift. By God’s power an earthquake caused the prison doors to break open and allowing Paul and Silas to escape. But instead of running they stayed and they told the jailer not to harm himself but how to save himself. The jailer asks, “What must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.”

See, it doesn’t matter who you are. It

doesn’t matter what you have. When you believe you aren’t given any claim to fame. You’re brought low. As low as you can go – as low as Jesus himself. You see, the gospel is the great equalizer. Because the gospel says that faith is the only credential for salvation and there’s not one person who can’t afford faith, who can’t access faith, who can’t enjoy the benefits of faith.

And Jesus was no respecter of persons. He was just as likely to invite a rich man to come down out of a tree as he was to let a poor woman to wipe his feet with costly oil with her hair. He was just as likely to raise a poor widow’s son from the dead as he was to call a wealthy tax collector to be his disciple. Jesus broke every social custom in the book by constantly crisscrossing the social and economic boundaries of his time.

And so now we have to come to application. What does it mean to put James’ teaching into practice? Should we just wait for poor people and rich people to show up and we’ll treat them all the same?

Well, maybe. But we have a problem in the United Church. What was once Canada’s largest denomination, has been in free fall for generations. And as it has shrunk it has become more and more of a homogenous gathering of people with white hair and who have their lives mostly together.

Walk into the average United Church today and you will find it is not very diverse. There are a few exceptions of course – but by in large, what you will find is more like the 1% rather than a representative of the wider community.

The prayer list in most United Churches today includes mostly things like, “We pray that Bill and Jane will come back from their big trip safe and sound, that Mildred will come through her treatments okay, that Bob’s grandkids will do well off at University this year.”

But that’s a problem! The family of God isn’t homogenous. It’s as diverse as the human family. And when someone comes to church, they should be surprised that every age, stage, colour, race and political viewpoint is represented here – that is if we’re actually putting James’ teaching into practice.

One of the things I’m proud of here is that our church has become more diverse. We’ve