



Women's Bible Study
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Demonstrating Faith Through the Royal Law
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In 1996 I taught through the book of James. Despite the fact that it has been eleven years, there are some of you sitting here today who attended those lectures, so you'll be glad to know that I am taking an entirely different approach to the subject matter...in case you have perfect recall.

I certainly don't, however, so I've been going back and looking up my old lectures. And I have to say that I am both encouraged and discouraged. I'm encouraged, because I can look at the identical passage today, and see quite different and deeper themes in it. But I'm discouraged, because it makes me want to toss everything I wrote a long time ago.

However, the lecture from 1996 on today's passage was notable for one reason. In it I told a story about my mother changing her name. And of all the stories I've ever told about my family, this is the one that people talked about the most, so I am going to retell it today for those of you who've joined us in the past 11 years.

My mother's given name is Solveig. In this part of the world, that will be a normal name to some of you. After all, it's Norwegian. But it happened that my mother hated her name her whole life, which doesn't explain why she chose to inflict it on me as a middle name.

During the early 90's my mother and her sister Hedvig (obviously, from the same Norwegian gene pool!) attended a large art class. On their preprinted name tags were their names: Solveig Dahl and Hedvig Niemeyer. During the class, people kept coming up to one or the other of them and saying "It's really remarkable...did you know that there are TWO Norwegian ladies in this class?" to which they would reply "It's not that remarkable - we're sisters." Others would say, in slow, distinct tones "You speak English very well." My mother finally had had enough. After that art class, she decided to change her name to "Sunny". Now she has a bunch of friends who have only known her since the name change, and she claims that it transformed people's attitudes towards her. Now she gets called on in class, because the teacher can finally spell and pronounce her name. Now people remember her. Now she has an outgoing personality in keeping with her new name. Now...she's Sunny!

The really funny thing about this story was that she did not tell us any of this until a couple years after it happened. And that was probably a good choice, since her children teased her mercilessly. My mom felt a bit awkward about changing her name, as if somehow she was repudiating her parents' heritage. But it does illustrate something

about prejudice. All her life my mother resented the impression that she is a Norwegian immigrant when in reality, she's third or fourth generation American. Even a name can cause a person to be pre-judged. And that is what prejudice is – concluding something false or generalized about a person or a people group based on something other than the facts.

This sort of pre-judging or assessment still goes on, even in church life. I once visited a large church in Chicago. I appeared to be a single parent; my husband was in England. No one greeted me; no one spoke to me in the pews before or after the service. But this has not usually been my experience when visiting churches. When we attend unfamiliar churches as a family the pastor usually makes a point of greeting us. This could be, of course, because it's impossible NOT to notice John during congregational singing, or perhaps a family of five sticks out more. But I suspect that many single people encounter an unintended “cold shoulder” in churches. I don't think that anyone intends to show favoritism in church life. At the same time, though, all of us tend to gravitate to people who are like us, and that makes it harder to cross age, gender or socioeconomic lines, even in church.

That is one reason that I am so fond of Women's Bible study. Especially in the morning group, we have women crossing age and background lines. And that, my friends, is biblical – having the older and the younger women together.

In fact, this whole passage is about being counter cultural – about avoiding the world's attitudes where they contradict Christ.

To make that point I'd like to start with a verse from last week.

I. Keep Yourself from Being Polluted by the World

Please turn with me to James chapter 1, beginning with verse 27. I know that we studied this verse last week, but we will miss the impact of chapter 2 unless we recognize that chapter 1 is a short introduction to the themes that will be expanded upon in later chapters.

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27)

Concentrate on that last phrase... “to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Now James is going to tackle that very thing...the world's values and practices creeping into our worship.

Next turn your attention to James 2:1-4, where we see

A. God's values (v. 1-4)

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring

and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby 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?” (James 2:1-4)

Something like this must have been happening, in order for James to have addressed it. Remember, he’s writing to all the churches, not one specific body of believers. And notice too something pointed out by Jann last week – he addresses them affectionately as “My brothers…” in verse 1, and even more affectionately as “my dear brothers” in verse 5. James is not raising himself above them as a judge, even though he had the spiritual authority to do so; rather, he’s applying to them the same standard as he does to himself. But somewhere in the churches these distinctions of wealth must have been creeping in.

He appeals to them as **“believers in our glorious Jesus Christ.”** (v. 1). Remember that Jesus was a servant leader, one who stooped down and washed the feet of his disciples – one who laid aside his glory to become one of us. And to call him **“our glorious Jesus Christ”** doesn’t do justice in English to the beauty of the picture James draws in Greek. He is likening Jesus to the “shekinah glory” – the visible manifestation of God’s presence among us. The shekinah glory was seen in the Holy of Holies in the temple and the tabernacle. This is the glory of Jesus, God among us. Yet he made no distinctions, showed no favoritism, spoke to women of bad reputation and tax collectors and dying thieves.

“Don’t show favoritism” Literally, the word favoritism was **“lifting up the face”**, a phrase that meant snobbery. In the example James gives, a rich man is treated differently than a poor man during the worship service. The rich man is identified as such by his clothing and jewelry, and we still make those assessments today based on what people wear, or drive, or where they work, don’t we? But worship, especially, is a place where all distinctions between us are wiped away, and we all become brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. We would not do this to members of our family. It is no more appropriate at church. So if we are to practice God’s values, we are to put away the world’s distinctions of wealth and place.

We learn from verse 1 that God does not show favoritism. But we see in verses 5-7 that God does exercise choice:

B. God’s Choice (v. 5-7)

“Listen, my dear brothers: 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? But you have insulted 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 slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?” (James 2:5-7)

James is continuing on with the point about God's counter cultural values, but he also makes an extremely important point about God's sovereignty when he says **"Has not God chosen..."** I want to draw your attention to that phrase more closely.

What difference does it make that God chose us? It shows that God is exercising his right as creator to be sovereign over his creatures.

And who does God choose? Paul puts it this way: **"Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."** (1 Cor. 26-30)

God did not work within the established power structure. We hear over and over again that God chooses whom he will, and these are not always the people that have value in the eyes of the world.

So what does this mean for us and for our children? I think it means that it is more difficult to follow Christ when we are well off and comfortable than it is when folks are poor and desperate. Rochester is a wealthy and influential community, with many highly educated people. When Jesus spoke to the rich young ruler, he said, **"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."** (Luke 18:24)

That doesn't mean it's impossible, but I think, perhaps, it's harder. Because of our affluence and our busy lives, Christianity comes to seem like just one more consumer choice in the midst of a big buffet of choices that all clamor for our time. Yet Christ told the rich young man that his riches stood between him and the kingdom of God. It was not the issue of wealth itself. Much of the work of ministry in this world is done by people who give generously out of their abundance, and who use their riches wisely. Rather, it was the fact that he could not follow Christ wholeheartedly because he was distracted by his riches. Even today the gospel is flourishing most in the developing nations of the world.

There are two types of poor. There are the materially poor, whom James is referring to in this passage. And there are the poor in spirit, whom Jesus spoke of in the Beatitudes, those who hunger after holiness. We may not be materially poor, but if we are poor in spirit, the gospel is for us. But if we are neither, the gospel will have to clamor for attention in our crowded and comfortable lives.

That is why it is all the more important for us to read a passage like this carefully, so that the words leap out **“Has not God chosen...”** It is crucial to understand that God has chosen us. Of course it seems like we chose him, when we asked him into our lives. But as we get to know God’s word more clearly we can see this idea over and over again, that **God sought us**. And that has four implications.

1. First, it means that God loved you, knew you and chose you before you ever thought of him.

Some of us are prone to depression or self doubt, and find it hard to believe that anyone could ever love us. How important, then, to know that God loved and chose us before we knew him. Others of us have a lot of pride and take comfort in the idea that we came to Christ ourselves, as an act of will. But for those it’s important to understand that God chose us, not because we were worth choosing but because he sovereignly chose to love us.

We throw around that word “sovereignty” a lot in Bible study. It simply means that God is over everything. He’s the king, the final authority, the one who decides. I find it comforting to know that someone much bigger and more capable than me is running not only my life, but the universe and everyone else’s life as well.

2. Second, it means that God will not let you go, having chosen you and died for you.

This, too, is important. We read in the gospel of John **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” (John 6:44)** and **“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:28-30)**

So anyone who feels a tug towards Christ is being drawn by the One who loved him from eternity. What’s more, once we belong to Christ, we cannot cut ourselves loose, nor can we be torn out of God’s hand by some outside agent. He will not let us go.

A third implication:

3. It means that someone loves you who is completely constant and unchanging.

The best of human relationships are inherently unstable. People betray or let down those they love. They age. They die. Only in God are we loved by someone who will never lapse in his feelings towards us, because God is unchanging and true.

A fourth implication of the fact that God chooses us:

4. It means that while we are responsible to share the love of God with others, we are not responsible for whether they believe.

This should free us, in a sense, from terrible guilt. All of us who are raising children know that it's not over til it's over. Children become adults and although they are out of our homes we still feel the reflections of their choices upon us. Similarly, some of us live with spouses we deeply love, but who do not share our Christian beliefs. And others of us sorrow over siblings or parents who reject the gospel. We are required to live faithfully in front of the people we love, so that we don't discredit the gospel. We are responsible to speak of the gospel to those who don't know it, and to pray for the salvation of others. But in the end we cannot by our own efforts actually drag our loved ones into the kingdom of God. That part is up to the sovereign God who draws men and women to himself.

So this idea that God chose us has some surprising implications for our day to day lives. It provides us with a foundational love relationship that will keep us afloat even through drastic change in our lives. It means that we can't fall out of a relationship with God once we truly have one. And it keeps us from breaking our hearts over those we love who do not share our views, even while we pray fervently for them.

Now let's return to James 2:5-7, where James talks about the rich exploiting 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 slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?" (James 2:5-7)**

He reminds his readers that the rich have done them no favors. They are exploiting the poor. They are dragging them through the courts. And yet these are the people who are receiving favoritism in the worship service? It doesn't make sense, James gently points out.

Towards the end of this passage, James refers to **"the noble name of him to whom you belong"**. What is translated here as "noble" could literally be read the "lovely name" to which you belong. The idea in this verse is that of a woman taking a husband's name in marriage, or a baby receiving a name at a christening. We belong to his name. We are in a relationship deeper than marriage or parenthood. And that relationship, which was initiated by God and which does not change, should affect everything we do day to day.

The next section discusses the Royal Law.

II. Keeping The Royal Law

What is the royal law? James lays it out for us in verse 8:

A. Love your neighbor (v. 8)

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right.' (James 2:9)

1. Why is it called "the royal law"?

It could be the royal law because it comes from King Jesus. Or it could be the royal law because it is the source and highest example of all laws. But in one sense, it doesn't matter what we call it as long as we do it.

2. How do you love yourself?

We tend to love ourselves indulgently, forgivingly, tenderly, with care. One commentator suggested that even when we are dismayed by the sight of our face in the mirror in the morning, we at least take the time to clean it up and transform it – to make it look its best. Our dismay is coupled with action.

Now apply that to others. Do we love them indulgently, forgivingly, tenderly, with care? Do we take steps to help them be their best? We forgive in ourselves things that we deplore in others. James says, do that to everyone else. Think of how much anguish would be avoided in this world if we were as forbearing to others as we are to ourselves.

3. What happens when we keep the Royal Law?

Something extraordinary happens: the development of true community. About half of our small group leaders went on a retreat at the beginning of January. The whole 24 hours was a complete experiment in community. And, from my perspective at least, it worked amazingly well. To take a bunch of reticent Minnesotans and put them together in a cabin spending time in spiritual exercises, discussion and prayer, was an unusual experience to say the least. But at the end of our time I had caught a glimpse of something that I want to replicate in all our small groups – a glimpse of the true community that is possible when we have a shared desire to follow Christ. I'm still thinking about that weekend, and how to reproduce it in our small groups. But at least now I know it's possible.

True community is possible when we start to observe the Royal Law. It takes us a step further than the Golden Rule, which is also important (“Do to others as you would have them do to you”) by actually LOVING others as much as you love yourself. It's there that the barriers fall and we catch sight of what relationships will be like in heaven.

So if you want to put the Royal Law to work, start by trying it in your small group. You can show your love for others by doing things for them, by deferring to them, by including them, by doing all the things that you would do for yourself without thinking.

See what amazing things will happen when we Love our Neighbors.

But James also tells us to

B. Love the law (v. 9-13)

“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, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. Speak and act as those

who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:9-13)

James’ readers were Jews. They knew how important the law was, for it reflected God’s unreachable standards of justice and honor. How, then, does favoritism break the law? Because it is a sin against others. It is part of our ethical behavior, specifically, the honor we bestow on other humans.

That’s why James uses the two examples of adultery and murder. Why these two particularly? Perhaps because they both reflect the honor we give to others. When we murder (and this could mean physical murder or the sort of anger that kills, described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount) we destroy another human. Our anger trumps their right to remain alive. When we commit adultery, our needs trump our obligations to children, spouses, society and so on. Sin is, indeed, All About Me. Both these crimes are against others, and come about because we put our desires first. That breaks the Royal Law – loving others as we love ourselves.

Before we leave this passage, let’s take a look at some hard questions.

III. Some Hard Questions

A. Does God show favoritism?

Those of you who’ve been working on the study questions have already given this hard question some thought. It is very clear from the passage that God does not show favoritism (defined as “giving preference to others on the basis of certain attributes”) towards people. We know that from verses like Galatians 3:28: **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”**

But we also know from the passage that God chooses us. Is that the same as favoritism? I think, rather, it reflects his right as the sovereign of the universe to do what he will. To choose, according to his unknowable purposes, those who would respond to the message of the gospel. There was nothing inherently lovable in us, for at the time he chose us all mankind was in rebellion towards God. But within that choice, there is no distinction of race, gender, people group.

In the Old Testament, the Jews are called “God’s chosen people”. But their choice is little different than the way in which God chooses his people today. He called Abraham, a pagan, out of Mesopotamia and made him into a great nation. From his descendents, the Jews, came the Messiah, Jesus, who would offer salvation to all nations and people groups. So it would be accurate to say that God’s chosen people are truly all who follow Christ.

A second hard question:

B. How can the law give freedom?

“Law” and **“freedom”** seem to be two polar opposites. I mean, you can’t have freedom and have laws, can you? On the contrary, laws provide a necessary fence or boundary to keep out anarchy and keep in civility towards each other. And in the same way, the 10 Commandments provide a boundary line showing God’s expectations of us, even while letting us know that we cannot keep those expectations without the help of Christ. But we’ve seen this conjunction of freedom and law before. For example, in Psalm 119 we read **“I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.” (Psalm 119:32) or “I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts. (Psalm 119: 45).** In other words, it’s the presence of the law itself that provides the freedom.

C. How can mercy triumph over judgment and still keep the law?

If the law is so non-negotiable that breaking one part of it means breaking all of it, then how can James say that mercy will triumph over judgment? James is not talking about the judgment that determines your eternal destiny (see NIV footnotes), but rather, about the judgment that will evaluate how we’ve spent our lives as Christians. Remember, this letter is written to believers. They already have been forgiven. But James points out that we will be accountable for how we’ve lived our lives. So live in such a way that our allegiance to Christ makes a difference.

Finally, perhaps the hardest question of all:

D. How can I keep the Royal Law?

Keeping the Royal Law simply means loving others as much as we love ourselves. We treat ourselves well; we cut ourselves slack for being tired or sick; it’s time to show that same forbearance to others. We find a way to feed ourselves, to put money in our bank accounts, to do things that make us feel and look good. Loving others means that we will give them these opportunities as well. This is the true meaning of community; that we love others as much as we love ourselves.

All of these words are pointless unless they are accompanied by concrete action.

I have a younger relative who should probably remain nameless, but he used to visit us in Minnesota, was very handsome and was a bit of a scamp. Some of you might remember my nephew Johnny. When he was in high school they had to read Joseph Conrad’s book *Heart of Darkness*. Those of you who remember it from your high school days might recall that the emotional climax of the book comes with the line “The horror! The horror!”, in response to what the main character sees in the jungle. Because, obviously, he’s horrified. Now Johnny had to write a paper on the book, and having not read it nor even bothered to look up the Spark Notes, was told by one of his friends that the most important part of this book was that line I’ve just quoted. He sat down and wrote a beautiful essay on the meaning of the sentence, “The whore! The whore!” (spelled W-H-O-R-E, not H-O-R-R-O-R) His English teacher, a friend of his mother’s, was so taken

with his creativity she would have given him an A if she didn't have to give him an F for having not read the story. As with my nephew, so it goes with the book of James. Substance is a lot more important than style here. Unless we are actually DOING what we're supposed to be doing, it's not going to count. **“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom.”** Our efforts on this earth are going to be evaluated or judged, by the Royal Law – did we treat others as well as we have always treated ourselves? It's time to stop talking, and start doing.