

*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 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, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?*

*If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But 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. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2:1-13*

Coca-Cola is a carbonated soft drink which is produced by the Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta, Georgia. The soda was created as a patent medicine in 1886 by Dr. John S. Pemberton, an Atlanta pharmacist, and over time its distinctive taste caused it to become popularized and used at local soda shops. Coca-Cola became a national trademark company in 1944 and the name Coca-Cola refers to two of its original main ingredients: *coca* leaves and *kola* nuts. Today there are nine basic types of Coca-Cola and the company sells 127 different flavors of soft drinks throughout the world. Coca-Cola has been and continues to be one of the most popular soft drinks in the world, so much so that it has garnered the nickname “Coke” – unless of course you like Pepsi instead. And that would be me, the two or maybe three times a year I might drink a cola drink of some kind. But when I was younger, I liked Dr. Pepper better than either one. Sometimes we just have way too many choices.

But the reality is, we do love to have choices, in order to satisfy our personal preferences – whether it be Coke or Pepsi, Ford or General Motors, Mercury or Evinrude, MacDonald’s or Clam Bucket, Canadian Tire or Walmart, Adidas or Nike, Hewlett-Packard or Apple, a tall Dark Roast coffee or a Grande, half-caf, sugar-free, pumpkin spice latte. Choices, personal preferences, are a way of life for those of us who live in North-America – so much so that just about every aspect of our culture and lives is now infected with an attitude of entitlement and self-oriented rights, driven by the constant and continuous insatiable desire to be happy by having our personal preferences satisfied.

This flies directly in the face of what we have been hearing from James over these past two weeks. Two weeks ago we heard James say that God is not in the business of offering us choices regarding our personal preferences, but rather, *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change”* (James 1:17). Last week James told us we are to be *“doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”* (James 1:22) and we are *“doers of the word”* when we to keep ourselves *“unstained”* from the choices and personal preferences of the *“world”* - by choosing and preferring to give ourselves to causes like helping *“orphans and widows in their affliction”* who are desperately living on the edge of life. Keep in mind that the theme of the book of James, with its 54 imperative commands, from beginning to end, is a passionate, urgent demand that we live out the reality of our living faith in Jesus Christ. Remember also that the context of the book of James is that of the *“testing”* our living faith in Jesus Christ - in order to reveal where we are in our walk with God - and also to warn, encourage and empower us to pursue a greater and deeper and more mature faith in God through Jesus Christ.

In our passage this morning, James writes of another test of our living faith. In our text today we're going to be taking the *preference test* to see if our living faith is real. This test is all about how we *treat people* – a continuation of what James wrote of at the end of chapter one. In today's text, as we are now coming to the end of tax season, a season where we can only claim things on our income tax forms that we have receipts for - James is, in one sense, saying to us: "Show me the receipts" of your living faith in the way you have treated other people in your walk with God through Jesus Christ.

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James opens chapter two by setting down a principle in verse one: "*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*" Or in other words: "Favoritism is not compatible with a living faith in Jesus Christ" because living faith in Jesus Christ is rooted in the character of God, a God who does not show "*partiality*" towards anyone. Deuteronomy 10:17-18 says: "*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.*" This is also true in that God is always just, and His *judgments* are also always without partiality. God's Word declares that each and every person without exception is a sinner, deserving of eternal judgment. What that means is that we are not saved on the basis of our race or gender or skills or background or position or place in life or what we have done or what we possess or how much money we do or do not have. We are saved solely God's by sovereign choice, through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ in our place on the cross. We are also saved only by God's gift of grace, a grace that is free and unmerited. God shows no partiality. He insists we do the same. Favoritism is contrary with a living faith in Jesus Christ. "*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*"

James makes this strong statement right at the beginning of this preference test because how we treat people reveals the motives of our hearts. In order to show partiality, we have to first determine a difference between those before us. Then we have to make a judgment as to which people are more deserving than the others. Almost inevitably, we will choose the one who is most like us. Unless we don't like ourselves; then we'll choose someone different from us. But in all cases of judging the differences between people, the standard we use in measuring them is the standard of *ourselves*. Whenever we show partiality in any way that we treat people, we are doing it out of a "self" motive.

James gives us an illustration about this in our text. He sets up the scene as two men who enter the "*assembly*" of a church at the same time. One man is wealthy; he is wearing "*a gold ring*" and "*fine clothing*." The other man is a "*poor man in shabby clothing*." James then asks us if we "*pay attention*" to the wealthy man and seat him in a "*good place*" but then tell the "*poor man*" to stand off to the side or sit at our feet, have we "*not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*" Yes, we have; most likely the only reason that we would have given the rich man the preferred seat would be because of how we would benefit in doing so. James warns us about extending preferential treatment those who can do something for us. Because of our remaining fallen nature we naturally give preference to those who will benefit us or will make us look good. Sometimes we show preference to people of high standing or much wealth for the benefit of what they can do for us. But sometimes we show preference to people of lower standing for the benefit of how good they make us look when we stand next to them - or how good we would look in showing compassion and grace and mercy toward someone who is of lower standing. If left unchecked and unaccountable, our motives behind how we treat people will always be rooted in our "self-ness."

The foundation of our prejudicial preferences regarding others is our own personal insecurity. Sadly, we can allow uncertainties about ourselves to trump what we know about the love of God – so then we put people down because it makes us look better and we associate with those who have authority, wealth or position because that makes us look more important. May Jesus be our only security! May he become ever greater in us and may we become ever more less of our standard of value. The apostle Paul spoke of this in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 when he wrote: *“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”* We are to be a people of God with a living faith that shows special favor to no one but Jesus Christ.

*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, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?* James 2:5-7

James now challenges us in the preference test that our living faith in Jesus Christ is real *regarding* how we treat others *in light of God's purposes*. James' words in verse 5 reflect the first Beatitude that Jesus opened with in his Sermon on the Mount with in Matthew 5:3: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* James speaks of the *“poor of the world”* as being *“rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.”* He then tells us for that very reason we should not be *dishonoring “the poor”* by showing preference towards those who can benefit us; in fact, in verses 6-7 James tells us that most often those who have the place and position and possessions in life can be the ones will do us the most harm. James is basically telling us that we have no business thinking that we have the ability to discern who should be shown preference - when we substitute our opinion for God's opinion and look down on those whom God Himself approves. Clearly God measures people by a standard of preference much different than ours. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount exposed the shallowness of our fallen human understanding of God's standard of preference and revealed the unfathomable depths of God's preferential purposes according to the standard of God Himself.

In Matthew 23:12 Jesus said: *“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”* This makes no sense by our human way of reason and understanding; but it makes perfect sense by God's divine will of God's purpose, reason and understanding. 2 Corinthians 12:9 Jesus said: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* Why does Jesus show himself strong in our weakness? Paul tells us why in Ephesians 2:4-7: *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, SO THAT in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”* God chooses the people He chooses and God treats the people the way He treats that so that we might exalt Him above all circumstances, above all trials, above all tests, above all things - *“so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”* The apostle Paul understood this. In Philippians 4:12-13 he wrote: *“I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”* We will only pass the preference test that our living faith in Jesus Christ is real when we treat all people in light of God's purposes in that God is to always be exalted in and over and above all things that happen to us in life.

*If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But 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. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. James 2:8-11*

Here James challenges us once again. This time he takes us deeper into the preference test that our living faith in Jesus Christ is real *regarding* how we treat others *in light of Jesus’s commandments*. And once again, he does so by taking us back to the words of Jesus. In Matthew 22, Jesus was confronted by a lawyer who was spurred on by the Pharisees who were trying to trap Jesus. In verses 36-40 we read the lawyer asked Jesus: *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”* And Jesus said to him, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”* Jesus is telling us here that the 10 commandments (Law) can simply be summed up in the commands to love God and love our neighbors. We see this in that the first four of the 10 commandments deal with the ways we are to love God – and the last six of the 10 commandments deal with the ways we are to love each other/our neighbors. But not only the two love commands perfectly sum up the 10 commandments, they perfectly also sum up the whole Old Testament, in that they completely summed up the *“Law and the Prophets.”* In other words, all that God had revealed in His Word up until that time was summed up in the two love commandments. Everything that God reveals of Himself deals with how we are to treat Him and how we are to treat others. When we treat others and each other the wrong way, we violate not just part of God’s Word but all of God’s Word.

*“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”* We are guilty of violating the Word of God by showing prejudicial partiality and personal preference towards ourselves or others or each other – and when we put down or look down at or ignore or criticize or slander or gossip about or get angry at or are bitter towards others and each other - because God commands us to love Him and love each other and love others. And when we don’t, we are in violation of all of the 10 Commandments. *“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”* There is a weighty sobriety to these words that cannot be ignored nor frittered away by human logic or reason. James addresses this in the last two verses of our text for this morning as he points out the reality that someday we are going to be judged. And as we all are naturally born as judges with an attitude of superiority, some of us will mature as we come to see others as equal to ourselves - but ultimately we will all someday discover that we are all *subordinate*, as we all will stand before our most sovereign and holy God who will judge us all.

*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2:12-13*

James finished this section declaring the truth that we will pass the preference test that our living faith in Jesus Christ is real when we show others and each other the very same *“mercy”* that God shows us. Those of us who are sitting in this room today need to remember that we did nothing to deserve the salvation we know in Jesus Christ. It is only by God’s mercy that God did not give us what we *do deserve* – which is God’s condemnation, punishment and wrath for our sin – which, by God’s grace, God put all of that condemnation, punishment and wrath on Jesus as he hung on a cross - for the forgiveness of our sin, and the redemption of our souls, and the restoration of our relationship with God, both now and forever. In Acts 10:34-35 Peter said: *“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* You and I and the most offensive person we know and the worst mass murderer who has ever lived *are all undeserving of God’s mercy*. That’s how serious God views any and every sin.

But the cross shows us the how serious God is about saving us. Out of the infinite love of His mercy and grace God “*gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:16-17). James tells us the key to passing the preference test that our living faith in Jesus Christ is real is the we show others “*mercy*” as we have received mercy. “*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.*” God’s love is power of the “*law of liberty*” - it adds what is lacking, breaks chains, heals sickness, lifts up those who are down, opens doors to a new life. God’s love liberates the one who chooses to love and show mercy - and it liberates the one who receives love and is given mercy. The cross of Jesus Christ is the instrument of God’s love by which we have received God’s mercy.

*“For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.”* Jesus spoke of the divine principle of God’s mercy in Matthew 6:14-15: “*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*” Paul reflected said the same to those of us in the church in Colossians 3:12-17: “*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*” Praise God that “*Mercy triumphs over judgment.*”

Shortly after Queen Victoria came to the throne of England, the Lord Chamberlain presented to her several documents that required her signature. Among them was a paper pertaining to a man who had committed a crime, and who had been sentenced to death. The queen’s signature was needed for his execution to be carried out. “And must I become a party to his death?” asked the eighteen-year-old queen. “I fear it is so, unless Your Majesty desires to exercise her royal prerogative of mercy!” To her delight, she was informed that she had the power to pardon the condemned man. “As an expression of the spirit in which I desire to rule, I will exercise my royal prerogative!” she said. She wrote the word pardoned on the document and the prisoner was set free. Our most loving God took the divine prerogative to mercifully pardon us and set us free from the the penalty of sin. May we live out a living faith with no other favor than to show mercy to others!

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