

January 26, 2014
Authentic Christianity

Authentic Christianity Loves
James 2:1-13

Opening words: Last week, I began a new seven-part sermon series called *Authentic Christianity*. We are going to spend each week in the epistle of James. It is a wonderful letter to study because it is so practical. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, James 2:1-13. This will be a challenging message for you to hear. Let me call this message *Authentic Christianity Loves*.

James 2:1-13 My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³ 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," ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ 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 those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? ⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. ¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Martin Luther King once said, "*I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.*" I couldn't agree with him more. If you can agree with Dr. King, say, "**Amen!**"

This is our second week in James, so I hope the background sounds familiar. James was the half-brother of Jesus. They shared a common mother, Mary. It was their fathers who were different. James was the son of Joseph, the carpenter. Jesus was the son of God, creator of the universe. He wrote this letter about thirty years after the resurrection of Jesus. By this time, he was one of the leaders of the early church and the pastor of the Christian congregation in Jerusalem. After the stoning of Stephen, his congregation scattered for their own protection. This letter is his attempt to reconnect with them. It speaks to us today because it is so practical. Technology has changed.

The human condition remains the same. This morning text makes this point clearly. Favoritism will not be tolerated within the church. When was the last time you hurt someone because you practiced favoritism?

This morning's text can be broken down into three sections. The first section comes from verses one through four. I have called the section **the reality**. Let's just be honest. In the life of the church, we have all been hurt by favoritism. It is also true we have all practiced favoritism. The second section comes from verses five through eleven. I have called this section **the problem**. What is the problem? The problem is you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, which means you are to be striving to be a little more like Jesus every day. Jesus treated everyone with dignity and respect. We have a problem in this area. We only treat certain people with dignity and respect. The third and final section comes from verses twelve and thirteen. I have called this section **the truth applied**. It's what happens when you apply those divine teachings to your life. If we would apply this divine truth to every relationship in our lives, then it would change every relationship in our lives. I have never met a person who didn't want to be treated with dignity and respect. So if you are ready to look at the text with me, say, "**Amen!**"

The Reality

Charles Drew was a brilliant medical doctor. His discovery of blood plasma resulted in saving thousands of lives in World War II, Korea, and the Vietnam War. At Pearl Harbor, for example, 96% of those who received plasma, survived. Dr. Drew's accomplishment did not go unnoticed. At the conclusion of World War II, he was named director of the National Blood Bank Program, and devoted himself to teaching doctors at Howard University Medical School. That is what makes the rest of the story so cruel. On April 1, 1950, while driving some young doctors to a conference, Dr. Drew was involved in an automobile accident in Burlington, N.C. He was rushed to a hospital, where his life could have been saved by plasma. But Dr. Drew was denied admission to the hospital because his skin was black. He died on the way to another hospital 26 miles away. I find that story to be very upsetting.

The pages of American history are stained with racism. Yet, it is not the only form of favoritism found in our society. Just think about it for a second. There is tension between the young and the not-so-young. There is tension between the educated and the uneducated. There is white collar workers vs blue collar workers. There is tension between the employed, underemployed and unemployed. There is tension between Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. There is a tension between Washington DC and the rest of the country. There is tension between the technologically advanced and the technologically challenged. There is tension between those who live in the city and those who live out of the city. There is even tension between different sections of the country. Obviously, there is tension between countries and continents. Do I have to go on or did you get the point? Our world is fractured because we promote the differences and ignore what we have in common. We shouldn't be surprised this mindset has made its way into the church.

I have never known of a church that isn't filled with tension. I believe a certain amount of tension is a good thing. It shows that people are interested. However, unchecked tension is a bad thing. How much tension, how much favoritism do you see here at Western Reserve? Have you ever been part of a church group that criticized or laughed at another group or individual within the same church? I will never accept such behavior. Verse one says it clearly, *"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism."* The reality is, we have become experts in favoritism. If that reality makes you uncomfortable, say, **"Amen!"** The first section is the reality. The second is the problem.

The Problem

John Hopkins is the resident Bishop of the East Ohio Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. One of the things that he has required all clergy to do is participate in something called Compass Groups. They consist of pastors from like-size churches within the same geographic area. The Bishop wants us to reconnect with one another. On Tuesday morning, I met with my Compass Group. In my group are the pastors from Berlin Center, Boardman, Canfield, Howland, Poland, Salem and Warren First.

The topic of the day was baptism. Within that two and a half hour period, a great theological debate broke out. The issue revolved around the issue of who is eligible for baptism. The problem was not the baby. The problem was the adults. The group broke into two camps. The first camp believed everyone was eligible for baptism. Who are we to judge another man? All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. The second camp believed baptism should only be administered if the vows are taken seriously. It is impossible for a non-disciple to produce a disciple. A non-Christian lifestyle at home eliminates the child from being baptized. Which camp do you think is correct? Is everyone automatically eligible for baptism, or should we hold the family to a certain standard? That is not an easy question to answer.

This is the problem. The church does not exist in the simple black and white, right or wrong. The church exists in the gray areas of life. Verse 10 says, *"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."* That means, as hard as you try to live a pure life, you are going to fail. How many times do we struggle with issues like baptism? We want to do the right thing but we are not really sure what is right? God never intended the church to be about laws and rules. However, God did intend the church to be about the spirit of the law. The true church exists in the tension of sincere hearts. Let's be completely honest.

Favoritism does exist in the church today because every relationship we hold in our lives is different. I favor my wife over all of you. I favor my children over all of you. I favor long term friends over someone I just met. I am not alone. You do the same thing. There are just some people you prefer, but it doesn't mean you hate anyone. It doesn't mean you shouldn't respect everyone. The scripture is not about keeping the letter of the law. The scripture is about keeping the spirit of the law.

James is not talking about being a communistic society, where everyone is treated equally. James is talking about treating everyone with dignity and respect. Do you treat everyone in this church with dignity and respect? Do you think you are better than anyone else? If you do, then you have a problem. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** The first part of the text talked about the reality. The second part of the text talked about the problem. The third part of the text talks about the applied truth.

The Truth Applied

History tells that Adolf Eichmann (1906-1962) was one of the primary architects of the Holocaust. When he was tried for his war crimes at Nuremberg, Yehiel Dinur, who had survived Auschwitz, faced Eichmann for the first time since leaving the concentration camp. When he saw Eichmann, Dinur sobbed and fainted. Years later, Mike Wallace of 60 Minutes asked Dinur what happened: Was he overcome by hatred or fear or horrid memories? Dinur's answer is stunning. He said he suddenly realized that Eichmann was not some God-like authority in a military uniform who sent thousands to their deaths. He was just an ordinary man. And then, said Dinur, "I was afraid about myself... I saw that I am capable of doing this. I am exactly like he."

Verses 12 and 13 say, *"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."* Did you know that within every Orthodox statement of faith is a line about Christ's return and the final judgment? Why? Because the oldest part of the Christian church wants to remind the world of the truth. We are not superior to the least or the lost. As a matter of fact, we are really no different from the least or the lost. God has accepted us not for what we have done, but God has accepted us because of what Christ has done for us. Without God's grace and mercy, we have no hope. Those qualities must be present in all our relationships. Never forget, the life that pleases God is filled with mercy. Do the people in your life consider you merciful? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

There's a wonderful story about a Chicago bank that once asked for a letter of recommendation for a young Bostonian being considered for employment. The Boston investment house could not say enough about the young man. His father, they wrote, was a Cabot; his mother was a Lowell. Further back was a happy blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and other of Boston's first families. His recommendation was given without hesitation. Several days later, the Chicago bank sent a note saying the information supplied was altogether inadequate. It read: "We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work."

What is important to God? God doesn't care about what your grandparents did. God doesn't care about what our parents did. God doesn't care about your education. God doesn't care about your nationality. God doesn't care about the Super Bowl. God doesn't even care about the mistakes you made in your life. The only thing God cares about is you! How much of a difference is Jesus making in your life?

Is he altering your opinions? Is he altering the way you handle your money? Is he altering the way you relate to other people? Do you treat everyone with dignity and respect? I hope so, because everyone is a child of God. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**