

August 16

James 2:1-13

Title Look Them in the Eye

James 2:1-13 NRSV

2 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 11 For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Core True religion requires seeing others impartially and loving them accordingly.

Call Consider the unconscious biases you have toward people who are wealthier than you are – both positive and negative. Ask yourself: How do these biases affect my relationships and my ability to see/treat other people – the wealthy and the poor – as Jesus does?

Compel To feel convicted (or have contrition) about how showing partiality and favoritism means that people are not treated as loveable simply because they are claimed as God's beloved.

Opening Question/Story

Being invited to a wedding in India – I was treated like a celebrity because I was the only Caucasian person present at a celebration with some 16,000 people.

[three photos of me at an Indian wedding]

It was fun to get special treatment that one time, but the whole time I knew I didn't deserve it. And I wouldn't want to repeat it. Especially in a context like church, where God is gets the glory and we are all trying to learn how to be servants.

Some people we look up to. Some people look down on us. But our friends are the people that we can look at, eye to eye. Oh, I didn't mention the people we look down on, or the ones who look down on us? We want to say, "Oh I never do that!" But remember what we learned last week: True religion is about reconnecting, reconnecting requires us to see what is true, and seeing what is true requires looking in the mirror. If you've ever laughed at an internet post featuring the "People of Walmart," then welcome to the club. And consider yourself on notice.

Yes, friends, we are constantly about the business of judging other people. On our best days, we realize we are doing it and we cringe inside. On our worst days, we revel in it. Most of the time we are totally unconscious of the fact that we do it. James has a simple instruction: [Stop it!](#)

Good Trouble

At this point, it would probably be helpful to learn a little more about James, widely referred to as James the Just. The historian Josephus and some later Jewish-Christian writers reported that James was held in great esteem by most of Jerusalem's residents, and especially by the poor. He wasn't universally loved, however. While the average person admired his piety, he got sideways with aristocracy, including the temple elite. When Rome's procurator Festus died (he was the one Paul stood before in Acts 24), the high priest Ananus II had James executed. But James was beloved that there was a public outcry. When Albinus the new procurator arrived, Ananus was deposed.

I share this with you as a way of illustrating just how passionate James was regarding matters of care and justice for the poor. James was the kind of person who, in the words of recently deceased Congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis, knew how to get into "good trouble." [\[image of John Lewis\]](#) James was disciple of Jesus, and a leader of the church. So he wasn't about political revolution. He wasn't concerned with "sticking it to the man." What he is chiefly concerned about is the practice of true religion – that is, James wants the church to be the church, and for God's people to demonstrate and showcase God's kingdom values.

For James: [True religion requires seeing others impartially and loving them accordingly.](#)

The problem James describes is obvious enough. Believers are treating one another differently based on class and wealth. This goes against everything Jesus taught and modeled. It is not how people who refer to one another as "brother" and "sister" should treat one another. And while the way James describes the problem may seem as though he is chiefly concerned with disrespecting the poor, the issue negatively affects the wealthy as well.

Wait, how can getting preferential treatment be bad? Lots of reasons!

- Any relationship based on eternal and false images inevitably contributes to our egos becoming swollen, empty, and fragile.
- Whether we treat people better for being rich or worse for being poor, we deny their inherent value as human, made in the Image of God. Preferential treatment is objectifying and dehumanizing.

- As Christians, our privilege and responsibility is to see people the way God sees them, and to treat people the way Jesus treats them. To treat people equally is to honor the truth of who they are before God, and is an act of love.
- The church should be the one place where nobody has a pain in the neck. Nobody has to strain their neck to look up at others, and no one has to strain their neck to look down. In God's church, we get to look each other in the eye, as equals.

Does this sound naïve and idealistic? Well, sure. But loving people well, treating them with uncommon dignity, conferring to them the gift of unconditional hospitality, and allowing them to simply be themselves without feeling obligated or shamed or manipulated? That is a GIFT. That is a gift of Freedom. I want to be part of a community that is just that naïve and idealistic.

The church should be the ONE community in which people can experience God's no-strings-attached acceptance. *Church is where we look each other, lovingly, in the eye.*

Recently I was listening to a podcast in which Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr recalled a person asking him, "What did you do the day after you were on Oprah's television show?" It's sort of a funny question. Rohr lives according to his Order's vow of poverty. He lives by himself with his dog in a little house next to a retreat center in New Mexico. The day after his interview on Oprah's show, he got up and took his dog for a walk. Like he always does. He is after all, a very average person. Yet, he also knows that his writing has been very influential. He knows that many people put him on a pedestal. He also knows that many people would like to pull him off that pedestal. And he recalls how some pretty well known people have come to visit him at his little hermitage. People like Bono and Melinda Gates have sat at his kitchen table. The reason such celebrities would want to share coffee with him is not only because he is wise, but because he is so very ordinary and because he treats them as ordinary too.

We all need the gift of being treated as both ordinary and special!

When the church is at its best, that is what we do!

Conclusion:

Call *Consider the unconscious biases you have toward people who are wealthier than you are – both positive and negative.* Ask yourself: How do these biases affect my ability to see/treat other people as Jesus sees them?