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James 2:1-5, 8-10, 14-18

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO KEEP GOD'S LAW PERFECTLY!

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I don't know if you heard it yet, but Donald Trump is running for the office of President of the United States. I don't know if you would vote for him or might vote for him or wouldn't vote for him if he were the last person on earth, but he's rich, really rich. He's a billionaire many times over. That's billionaire with a B. What would you do if Mr. Trump showed up here one Sunday morning? What if Mr. Trump had a program where he gave \$50,000 to churches where he liked the service? What if he gave \$10,000 to an individual or couple who belonged to that congregation? Would you think about that? Would you go out of your way to welcome him to church that morning? Would you offer to help him use our hymnal? And what if at the same time, you had some vagrant off the street decide to attend church that morning as well? He wasn't dressed so well and quite honestly, he smelled like he hadn't taken a bath since last Christmas. Would the ushers put him right next to Mr. Trump? Would they give this homeless man the best seat in the house or would they encourage him to come some other time? Would we encourage him to stay for Bible class and fellowship time? Would we fall all over ourselves trying to make him feel comfortable?

That's the situation that James describes in our text today. We like to judge people based upon their outward appearance. We show favoritism to certain types of people. We neglect the needs of others. Do you think that it's no big deal? Everybody does it? James tells us that this is sin. God tells us that this is sin. It is something evil. It helps to show us that IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO KEEP GOD'S LAW PERFECTLY.

Sometimes we think that it would have been wonderful to be part of the Christian Church in the first century. We want to romanticize that time, thinking that the saints back then were almost perfect. There were indeed many things for us to admire and try to emulate: their devotion to Word and Sacrament, their willingness to give, their endurance in the face of persecution and many other things. But the church of the First Century wasn't perfect. It was far from it. As we peruse the epistles of Peter, Paul, James and John, we see that every congregation had its strengths and weaknesses. In some places it was fear. In others it might be a willingness to compromise the truth or pride or covetousness or greed or anger or weakness in faith. The apostles would point out their sins and urge them with the help of the Holy Spirit to overcome these weaknesses.

All of these congregations dealt with sins that were prevalent. One of those sins that James dealt with was the sin of favoritism, the sin of favoring some people, especially the wealthy, over others, notably the poor. Now immediately some are going to ask, "Showing favoritism is a sin? Really?" It doesn't seem so bad. We love to rate and rank sins. If I were to ask you to name the ten or even fifty worst sins, I really don't think that showing favoritism to the wealthy would be one of them. Don't we have bigger fish to fry? There are real sins, things like murder, rape, armed robbery, theft, adultery, lying, cheating, drug dealing, abortion and many more. Yes, all these things are sins, offenses to a just and a holy God. There is no denying that. We know real evil. We know the Hitlers and the bin Ladens and members of ISIS and drug cartels and gangs. We say that we're not like them. And that's when the danger begins. Satan leads us to take our sin lightly and when we do that, we take our Savior's sacrifice lightly as well.

Is it really so bad? We show a little favoritism to the wealthy and influential while neglecting the poor? Isn't that the way of the world? You want to be nice to people who can be nice to you. You want to be nice to people who can help you out, doing a favor for you whether now or in the future. You want to be able to have an advantage when needed. Isn't it also the way of the world to brush off those people who really can't do anything for you? We see them all the time. If you go to downtown Detroit and attend a Tigers or Lions game, they are all over the place. Some will try to entertain you. Others simply stand on the street corner or hold cups and ask for spare change. The same people are out there game after game. Maybe you throw a couple of quarters into their cup or maybe you just keep walking. The truth is that most of us simply don't want to be bothered.

In the situation that James brings up in our text, two men show up for worship. When the congregation sees the rich man, the peoples' eyes light up. This is the kind of person they wanted to see. Every congregation struggles for money and they have good uses for it. Perhaps it is even to help the poor among them. They will find the best seat in the house for this man, wherever that may be. The second man is obviously poor. They simply brush him off. "You can stand over there or you can sit on the floor." They don't view this man as being able to do anything for them. James poses the question: "Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

A righteous judge does not consider who is standing on trial. He simply considers the facts. That's much easier said than done, isn't it? There really aren't that many righteous judges in our system who won't let any favoritism get in their way. Not every judge can or will be bribed, but wealthy criminals with high powered lawyers stand a much better chance in court than do poor people with public defenders. We know that the guilty often walk away scot free while innocent poor people may simply be assumed that they are guilty.

God is the perfect Judge. He shows no favoritism, no partiality, no bias, no preferences. His love for this world embraces all nations, tribes, races, languages, social classes, economic classes and gender alike. And he urges us to do the same in love.

"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 those who love him?" When we speak about the poor here, we are not merely speaking about those who don't have a lot of earthly wealth. We speak about the poor in spirit, those who know their sins so well, those who know that they cannot make it to heaven on their own merits, but flee to the cross of our Savior Jesus Christ to get the forgiveness of sins that they desperately need. They know that they have nothing to offer God but their sins, but they pray, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!" and they go home justified before God. For James' readers, material wealth is not the issue. Pride is the issue. Pride exalts us as better than others, deserving of God's grace, much more so than others. That was the major fault of the teachers of the Law in Jesus' day.

Yes, God chose the lowly things of this world to make his name great. Paul reminds us that God chose the weak things of this 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 can boast before him. Our salvation is not based on any human achievement, human wealth or human power. It is based solely on God's grace, love and mercy that he showed us in Christ Jesus. As we confess our sins and look to our Savior, we realize that our poverty has been transformed into riches.

Do we see ourselves as sinners in desperate need of a Savior? I don't believe that we always do? There were many in Jesus' day who didn't. They were the Pharisees who ran for the best places in the synagogues where everyone could see them. They saw themselves as having kept the Law perfectly and more. James would point out how very

wrong they were. Showing favoritism is a sin. Perhaps you don't rate it as a huge sin, but it is a sin nevertheless. It convicts you by the Law as a lawbreaker.

"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." James makes it perfectly clear that the Law indicts every one of us. The Law demands nothing less than total perfection. We like to see lawbreaking as a matter of degree. If the speed limit were posted at 55 miles an hour and we were traveling at 57 and someone blew by us at 90, we would expect a policeman to go after the one traveling at the greater speed. In fact, I think that most of us would be angry if the policeman would stop us and give us the speeding ticket. Our first reaction would be to ask why they didn't go after the real lawbreakers. But aren't we guilty of breaking the law? Does it matter if we broke it by a little or by a lot? We are guilty of breaking the law.

If we are guilty of breaking the law in one point, we are guilty of breaking all of it. If we are guilty of breaking one commandment, we are guilty of breaking all of them. The Law is a unit, an entirety. It demands total perfection. Just one sin, one blemish and we are guilty of breaking all of it. In God's courtroom, we are either guilty of breaking the entire law or keeping it perfectly. If we have kept God's Law perfectly, then we don't need a Savior. We can stand before God on our own merits. But have you kept God's Law perfectly? Have you never put anything above God? Have you always honored his holy Name? Have you never despised God's Word? Have you always showed perfect respect for your parents, teachers, government and others in authority? Have you always respected human life, every life? Have you always stayed away from sexual lust? Do you respect the property of others? Have you never gossiped or said hurtful words about someone else? Have you always been perfectly content with what God has given you? We are all lawbreakers and we all need God's mercy and grace.

Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners. He came to save you and me because we are all lawbreakers. He kept the entire Law in our place. Because he is God, his obedience can count for every man, woman and child on this planet. He died for us taking all those sins, large and small into his own body, paying the punishment that our sins deserved. He showed no favoritism. He washed all our sins clean with his holy, precious blood. He set us free from our sins and free for a life of serving God and our fellow man.

Faith always shows itself in our actions. We cannot claim to be Christ's own people without showing love to and for others. Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead. It is impossible to keep God's Law perfectly, but with God's forgiveness, we can strive to do the very best we can in letting the love of God show itself in our words and actions. May God move us to do so! AMEN.