

“Fuel—No Class”

I am holding in my hand a blast from the past. This is one of my high school yearbooks from Warrensburg High School in Warrensburg, Missouri, home of the mighty Tigers. And just like all of you, our school was divided into four classes. And if your high school was like mine, there weren't just four classes—freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors—there were all different sub-classes of people. And you got categorized by what class you were in.

For instance, in my school it seemed like the jocks ran the school. If you were a super athlete, that was great because the athletes were on top. I know it's different in other places. In some places, it's the band that rules the school. Some places, the chess club rules; but in our school, it was the athletes. And that presented a problem for me because while I wanted to be an athlete, and I did almost every sport at some time, I was not naturally gifted as an athlete. My best sport was swimming. But our High School didn't have a swim team so I just swam on the summer team. But that didn't really count, it didn't make me an athlete.

High school had very defined sub-classes. There were the athletes, the drama club, the band people, the choir people, the Future Farmers of America, the loners, the stoners, the in-crowd, the out-crowd. And all these years later, it's become increasingly clear to me that all through life, people get designated into classes.

The unsavory little secret about me, and the unsavory little secret about you, is that we keep unpublished lists in our minds of the desirables and the undesirables, the in-crowd, the out-crowd, the acceptables, and the unacceptable. This is what James was talking about in James 2:1 when he said, **“My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism” (James 2:1, TNIV)**. By the way, whenever James starts a sentence with the phrase ‘my brothers and sisters,’ brace yourself, because he's about ready to nail you.

Notice who James is talking to: *believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ*. James is addressing followers of Jesus. He's addressing followers of the One who all his life was in the wrong crowd, who knew what it was to be excluded, and who was in the wrong class.

It's no accident that when Jesus got in human form, he was born into a race that had been persecuted and excluded for centuries. It is no accident that he was born into a working class family, not into a family of power and prestige and wealth. It's no accident he was not a graduate of the prestigious religious schools of the day. Even though he was God in the flesh, he emptied himself and humbled himself to extend a revolutionary kind of love to all people, especially those people who find themselves on the margins of society.

James says those of you who follow him, those of you who put your faith in him, must not show favoritism. He's saying, “Don't fall into the trap of giving special treatment to somebody because of some external factor like wealth or status.”

Some of us, if the truth were known, have a preference for being around people who appear a certain way, and we're repulsed by others. Maybe you're turned off by the person who has all those body piercings. Or it could be that you're repulsed by the executive in his Armani suit or the girl with the tattoos or the pastor in his blue jeans. I like the Gilda Radner philosophy of dress. She said, “I make fashion choices based on what doesn't itch.” I like that.

Some among us prefer to be around the rich instead of the poor. We can be like the poem “Paul's Girl.” Have you heard this poem? Paul's girl is rich and haughty / My girl is poor as clay / Paul's girl is young and pretty / Mine looks like a bale of hay / Paul's girl is smart and clever / My girl is dumb but good / Would I trade my girl for Paul's / You bet your life I would!

Others of us, if the truth were known, prefer to be with the highly educated; and we look down our noses at those who have not pursued advanced education. Some of us have strong urges to be with white-collar workers instead of blue-collar people. And vice-versa; there's a whole bunch of people who have preferences to be with blue-collar people and who distrust anyone in management. And, of course, the unpleasant little secret that most of us will never admit is preference for people of certain ethnicity or skin color.

The unsavory little secret about me and the unsavory little secret about you is we all keep unpublished lists in our minds of the desirables and the undesirables, the in-crowd, the out-crowd, the acceptables, and the unacceptable. And James is saying in verse 1 that a mindset like that is inconsistent with faith in the One who came to break down barriers of race, who came to break down barriers of class, who came to break down barriers of gender; the One who came to express a revolutionary kind of love. Those kinds of attitudes must be exposed; they must be dealt with and they must be changed.

In the next several verses James sets up a simple little test, a simple assessment, to help us evaluate our own hearts in this. He sends two very different people into a church service: one rich, one poor; one affluent, one who lives on the margins. And he wants to see how we will treat these different people. Now instead of just unpacking these verses as they are written, I want to make them a little more current and bring the story a little closer to home; and I want you to pretend that you are the main character in these verses.

We've got a number of home groups that meet every other week, or every week. And we're always encouraging you to get in one of those or start one with some people you know, or people in your neighborhood. Our goal is that everybody who calls Saint Paul's their church would be connected to some sort of small group.

So let's say you're in a home group and you're hosting one evening at your house. And it's been a hard month for you. You just got laid off from your fairly comfortable sales job, and you don't know what you're going to do. You don't know if your skills are still marketable. It has been years since you've had to go out and search for a job. The severance package they gave you is going to give you some breathing room for a few months, but not beyond that.

But you agree to host your small group. So the night comes and all the usual suspects from the neighborhood show up. There's the polite chitchat. There are the kids running from basement to upstairs and all over the house. And after some veggie trays and some drinks, the gang starts making their way around the dining room table that you've extended with a couple of extra card tables for this crowd.

They all sit down for the meal. One of your neighbors has agreed to read the Scripture and say a prayer before the meal. And as they all start to sit down around the table, you hear a car pull into your driveway. You go to the front door and see two more cars pull up. One is a brand new, shimmering 700 Series BMW. And you wonder who that could be. The other is a 1985 Dodge minivan complete with vinyl wood panels that are faded and half gone. It's missing body parts that 20-plus years of bitter Missouri winters and baking summers have gotten the better of. And two couples get out of these vehicles and start to make their way to your front door.

As the BMW-driving couple gets closer, you spot her Prada shoes and Louis Vuitton bag. He looks like he's wearing Gucci driving gloves, right out of the pages of *GQ*. And suddenly you realize who it is. It's the CEO of fairly large company in the area; and you've heard his wife is a very successful attorney in the area. You've been dying to get an interview with someone at this guy's company, someone who would just help you get your foot in the door. You heard the CEO and his wife were members at Saint Paul's and lived in Joplin, but you never dreamed they'd come to your house for a small group meeting. And so you start thinking to yourself about what a night this could turn out to be.

Arriving at the door at the same time as Mr. and Mrs. Neiman-Marcus is the couple who got out of the minivan. You see they have a couple of kids with them, maybe ages 4 and 5, who look like they haven't bathed in a month. And to be honest, it smells like Mom and Dad, who are wearing early Salvation Army, had trouble finding their way to a shower anytime recently.

You greet both couples at the door; you introduce yourself and let them know how delighted you are to have them there for the first time. You take their coats and as you start to move to the dining room where your neighbor has already gotten things started, you realize there are only three seats left at the dining room table, right in the center of the table. Your wife has one there for you and there are two more.

And now, it's decision time. Which couple are you going to seat at the dining room table and which couple is going to be placed at the TV trays back behind everybody in the adjoining family room? What are you going to do? Well, you know for sure you're not going to miss this opportunity for a job; and so, without a split second of thought, you start to show your future boss to his seat of honor at the table. But you stop, realizing your neighbor has begun the Scripture reading; and because your church is doing a "Fuel" series, he's reading from James 2:2-4. And so you stand there while he reads these words:

"Suppose someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor person in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the one wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the one who is poor, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" (James 2:2-4, TNIV).

Those words cut you like a dagger. You've got four people and two good seats. And so what do you do? The one couple obviously feels second-class every day, every place they go. It's become a way of life for them. The other is used to eating in the best restaurants, sitting in the best seats at sporting events, riding in first class on airplanes. What are you going to do now? How are you going to handle this?

Well, I'm going to let you finish that story. But to help you with your decision it helps to get a glimpse of the early church. The church, groups of followers of Jesus Christ, was the only place in the ancient world where rich

and poor came together in community. It was the only place in the ancient world where slave and master stood on common ground. Slaves had no rights in their own culture. They owned no property. They had no voice. But the church was the one place on the planet where they were accepted and they were valued and they had dignity and they mattered. And it's where their voices were heard. Listen, the church was the only place, the only place, in the ancient world where social distinctions did not exist. A master would find himself sitting next to a slave. In some settings a slave might be the leader of a church where his master attended.

This kind of revolutionary love shocked the outside world of the day. It shocked the culture. And the church became a magnet because there was something so unique and inviting and captivating about an environment where you didn't have to say the right thing, look a certain way, wear the right clothes, drive the right chariot. You could just come as you are. James 2:8-9 says, **"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers"** (James 2:8-9, TNIV).

So, how are you doing with this? How is Saint Paul's doing with this? Surely none of us Saint Paulers would ever be tempted to treat another person with favoritism, would we? We wouldn't be tempted to break this royal law of love, to break God's heart, would we? I don't know. Sometimes I come around the church on a day off to do something or pick something up and I'm up here in my old hoody, my worn out jeans and ball cap. That's my preferred style of dress. But I've had the experience, quite a few times actually, where people treat me brusquely, or just ignore me completely, until I say something and they realize who I am and then they treat me totally different. When I'm just some guy dressed kind of ratty, I am treated one way; when I am Pastor Aaron, I am treated another. That makes me wonder and it makes me examine myself and ask how many times I am guilty of doing the same thing.

I read a few words this week that nailed me. Gene Appel's words are the very truth about me. These words are my words. "James 2 brings me face-to-face with a side of myself I would rather ignore, move past, and not think deeply or soulfully about. But the ugly truth about [me] is I'm guilty of the sin of favoritism more often than others could ever conceive. Or maybe I'm so self-deluded that in reality they already do. Sometimes favoritism resides so deeply, so hidden, and is expressed in such unsuspecting ways that others might not see it; but I know and God knows it's there.

"It's the times I extend a helping hand, not because another human being is in need, but I'm really hoping they'll return the favor and extend a helping hand to me. It's when I'm extra kind to an individual, even feigning interest in their life, their circumstances, their challenges, because I'm hoping to get something from them to assist me with my life, my circumstances, my challenges—their time, their leadership, their counsel, their donation, their endorsement, their expertise.

"And even in a more sick and twisted demonstration of my sin, I would have to be honest that in some of the moments where I appear to be getting this issue right and I show no detectable favoritism or make any class distinction to others, my motive is far from pure and I secretly hope others will see what a fair and even-handed guy I am. Or darker yet, that it could someday give me a good sermon illustration to share with others."

That's the truth about who I can be sometimes, sometimes on the inside. And I'm telling you, these words cut me deeply. And maybe you've lost all respect for me now. But I've got to go to deep and honest places like that in my life or I will just be merely listening to the Word and not doing what it says. It will be just drinking it in and not living it out. I've got to do something about this.

So if we're committed to eliminating favoritism, how do we show it? Does no favoritism, no class, mean treating everybody with equality? Is the opposite of favoritism equality? Actually the last couple of verses make it clear James is calling us to treat people with something better than equality. Look at James 2:12-13. **"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 2:12-13, TNIV).

But did you notice those words 'mercy' and 'merciful' are used three times in those verses? Mercy means love in action. Mercy is an attitude that starts in the heart of love; but it has to rise up, it has to find an expression. It's not just something you feel inside. You express it. Mercy says let me help. It doesn't just say I love, I care about you, I'm concerned about you. It says let me come alongside of you and assist you and show you how much I love you.

We're not only called to treat people equally; we're called to treat people with something better than equality—and that's mercy. Every day you and I have the opportunity to follow the example of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ to not show favoritism, but to instead extend mercy to people on the margins. And yes, that's people in Nicaragua, but it's also people in our own neighborhoods—rich and poor.

The way we treat others reveals what we really believe about God. God's dream has always been that his church would be a classless church. Some of you will say, "Well we've got that down; we're pretty classless around here sometimes." But God wants his to be a church with no class distinction. God's dream has always been for his church to be a warm and welcoming place for all people, a safe place to be loved and accepted, no matter race or money or clothes.

This is not just the job of the worship hosts; this is not just the job of the staff. This is your job. People all around you in this place need your hand and your heart. The teenager who sacks your groceries needs it. The server that brings your food at McDonald's. And the maintenance worker at your building needs it.

So, who is it in your life that could use mercy this week? Think of someone who God has brought into your life who maybe seems to have little to offer, who others wouldn't understand why you would show any interest in this person. Perhaps you've been guilty of ignoring this person in the past. So, how about it? Could you, would you, spend maybe three to five minutes this week interacting with someone you wouldn't normally interact with? Could you have a conversation? Could you extend an outstretched hand? Or if you really want to take it to an advanced level, could you have a cup of coffee together? Could you have a meal together?

Any time I see someone on the margins, I have a choice. I can extend my hand or I can withdraw. I can notice them, I can feel their pain, I can pray, and serve. Or I can avoid, withdraw, look the other way, and ignore. We always have a choice.

So are you ready to do our memory verse with me as we close? Let's read it out loud together, James 2:1. **"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism" (James 2:1).**

Let's say it again. *My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.*

Again. *My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.*

You can go impress somebody with that memory verse now, but more importantly, let's go do it. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let's bow our heads together for prayer.

God, it is my prayer now that in honor of the glorious Lord Jesus Christ who though he was God didn't cling to the advantages of his status and his position... In honor of the One who set aside the privileges of deity and took the status of a servant and became a human being and lived a selfless life and broke down walls and classes and distinctions and then died on a cross so that we could be rightly related to you and rightly related to each other ... In honor of him, it is my prayer that we would be so touched and so cleansed and so filled with your Spirit that the day would come when we don't see people's clothes or skin color or cars or houses or bank accounts anymore.

I pray that we can look into people's eyes and their hearts and say this is the one place on the planet where there are no class distinctions, where there's no favoritism, where all are welcome.

God, make us conscious of these words in our hallways, in our lobbies, in the parking lot, and wherever we go.

In the name of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, we pray together. Amen.

I thank Rev. Gene Appel, Teaching Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, for his resources in this message.