Think back to your school days. Is there someone that you remember being picked on, left out, or just plain ignored? Maybe they were not the most attractive person, or maybe they could not afford the right clothes. For whatever reason, they were never a part of the crowd. And you did nothing about it . . . and that is your biggest regret.

I hope it is a regret . . . it should be!

The name on my regret is Debbie. Who is yours?

For the audience of the letter of James, being religious was like breathing. There was no distinction between cultural life and spiritual life, so the Jewish believers took great pride in their religious persona. So James picks this arena to challenge his “brothers” . . .

“If anyone thinks himself to be religious . . .”

While that is the last section of chapter one, we need to remember that James did not write in chapters and verses. We added those, so let the letter flow as it was written. He challenged his fellow Jews to back up their religious claims by controlling their tongues, caring for orphans and widows, and keeping themselves unstained by the world.

He continues this challenge into chapter two . . .

“My brothers, hold on to your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without favoritism.”

Do you see the similarities in “being religious” and “holding on to your faith”? It is the same challenge. James calls their attention to what many would consider a minor offense, a little sin, or even no big deal. But is it a big deal? Is showing favoritism a deceitful offense? It is to the Father of the neglected, demeaned, and ignored.

The Greek word for favoritism is “prosopon lambano” and is literally translated as “to receive the face”. Favoritism acts on the first thing it sees. The offense comes not when one is warmly received, but when another receives a cold reception, or none at all . . . all based on looks, perceptions, and schemes.

James gave his audience an example . . .

“For example, a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in.”

Get a picture of these two men walking through the back doors of your church. The first man walks in with his head held high, expecting to be received. He has on fine, clean clothes, and is sporting a gold ring. He is wealthy. He is classy. He looks forward to these occasions because he knows all eyes will be on him.

The second man is a far different case. He chose the best outfit he had, but it was still filthy. It was stained with a variety of dirt, blood, and “fertilizer” . . . the residue of a poor man’s life. There were no rings on his calloused fingers. He was poor. He was simple. He dreaded these occasions because at best he would be ignored. But he came anyway.

When the two men walked through the door, those who received the face of the rich man ushered him to the best seat in the house. As the poor man lingered near the back of the room, he was ordered to sit “over there” by one man and allowed to sit on the floor by another. Why? Why was one man given the seat of nobility while another was sent into a corner or on the floor?

Would anyone have dared to do the opposite?

James wrote that to do so was to act in a prejudicial manner. He tells his audience that they are acting as judges with evil hearts. To judge a man based solely on his appearance was to act utterly contrary to the heart of their God.

“Didn’t God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him? Yet you dishonored that poor man.”

God chose. You dishonored.

This is the heart of the offense of favoritism. It is to deliberately demean a person in which God finds unfathomable worth. It is to reject a person for whom Christ shed His blood. It is ultimately a self-centered exercise of currying favor with one who might benefit you while rejecting or ignoring the one in whom you see no benefit.

In the mid-to-late 1600s, there was a man who spent his life serving in a monastery in Paris. He longed to be a priest, but his could never afford the proper education. He resigned himself to serve those who would become the spiritual leaders of his nation by washing dishes and repairing sandals. Through the years, he would sneak into lectures or eavesdrop in empty hallways. By the time of his death, as he neared 75, the students would often skip classes or linger into the early hours listening to the musing of the aged dishwasher as he spoke of living in the practice of being in the presence of Christ. The man is known as Brother Lawrence, and a book published as a series of conversations with the humble, poor dishwasher entitled, *The Practice of the Presence of God,* has been read for centuries in the church.

God chose him to have a great faith and to be an heir to the kingdom that he so dearly loved.

So what would you say to this man if he were to walk into your church? A man who smelled of that morning’s breakfast dishes and whose hands were stained by the leather of sandal straps? Would he be invited to stand far away? Imagine what you would miss . . .

In this moment, James set out a theological doctrine that no sin is greater or lesser than another, and that all sin is damnable, no matter how we esteem it . . .

“If you keep the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all.”

James commends that brother who finishes his life laying claim to his adherence to the law, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” That is a beautiful thing. It is a thing of excellence and nobility. But what happens when you allow yourself to fail? What happens to the love you have for your neighbor when you show them a seat on the back row? What happens when the utility of a person drives your actions toward that person? You have sinned . . . and you will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ as a “transgressor”.

But is showing favoritism that big of a deal?

Is it really a damnable offense?

No more or less than eating an apple . . .

So, again, what is so offensive about this sin? This sin that people commit so easily, and with such little thought? Why does James hone in on it as he wrote to these early Jewish believers in Christ?

I want you to consider how it feels for your child to be demeaned, left out, or just ignored. It is gut wrenching! Do you think it is any different with our Heavenly Father? Do you think He is unaffected when His poor kid is belittled, His overweight kid is teased, or when His average looking kid is ignored? He loves His kids. He is jealous for His kids. The question is . . . do we love them? Are we jealous for them?

Do we love like our God loves?

“Speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of freedom.”

This is not just an encouragement. This is a threat. I would make one alteration to the translation of this passage. The text literally reads, “Speak and do as those who are about to be judged by the law of freedom.” The life of a first century Jewish believer could be difficult, and persecution and death were no strangers to their communities, so James tells them to be ready for the imminence of the judgment. Every encounter could be your last, so speak and act as if you will be judged later that day.

Can you imagine what would happen if we lived with that kind of urgency?

“For judgment is without mercy to the one who hasn’t shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

How have you treated others? Have you truly shown mercy to the people God placed in your path? Do you have a regret? Jesus told His disciples very early on in His ministry, “Blessed are the merciful, because they will be shown mercy.” So how does that promise apply to you? Will you be shown mercy?

James actually uses two different words for “mercy” in this verse. The last word is the common Greek word, “eleos”, which is applied numerous times to acting with compassion and kindness to another, so he is clearly describing what actions are expected. But what should the one who does not show this compassion and kindness expect to receive in the time of judgment? James uses the word “anileos” which is the negative prefix “a” and the noun “hileos”. He is saying that the one who has neglected mercy will find himself standing before the judgment of God without any atoning, propitious work on his behalf. The blood of Christ is simply not available to the one who shows no mercy.

But, praise be to God, the one who has shown mercy as he holds on to his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, has everything he needs for forgiveness. The propitiating, atoning, satisfying blood of Christ is his . . . he is lacking nothing.

And in this moment, mercy triumphs over judgment.

So who is your past regret? I pray you will do everything in your power to redeem your words or your lack of words. Make amends. Restore a relationship. It is never too late to show mercy!

And never allow for a future regret. Find the Brother Lawrence behind every filthy outfit and average face.

In every moment of life, you will either worship your Father or sin against Him.

What will you choose?