

Loyalty in Relationships
James 2:1-7, Mark 9:2-7

Brothers and sisters, how do you know if someone is blessed by God? That's a good question to consider on Thanksgiving Sunday as we count our blessings and give thanks for them.

And perhaps that's our answer right there... if we are blessed by God because of our blessings, that is how we would determine if someone else is also blessed by God, right?

And so, this morning we've counted God's many blessings and given thanks for them; the blessings of family and friends, good jobs, good health, food on the table and gas in the car, there are so many blessings that show we are blessed by God. So, we can assume that if these kinds of blessings are evident in someone's life – then they are also blessed by God.

But... what if they are not evident in someone's life? What if someone doesn't have a home, or a good job or enough food? Or their life is marked by trial and trouble and hardship? What would we say then?

I don't think we'd come right out and say "They are not blessed by God!" instead we would ask if the lack of blessings are the consequences of bad decisions and lack of character.

For example, their lack of money is because they are careless, they lost their home to gambling debt, they can't keep a job because they don't take care of themselves and get sick, they don't have friends because they've chosen drugs instead.

So, we wouldn't say these people are aren't blessed by God, but that they've made bad decisions, and disobedient choices. They do not follow God's laws or live according to His will or wisdom and they are paying the price for that, consequences.

And if you pressed us a bit further, we'd admit that if they changed, were obedient and lived according to God's laws then they would start to receive and experience those blessings in their lives.

And this isn't necessarily wrong or unbiblical brothers and sisters. Prov 6:9-11 is a good example, it says "*How long will*

you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.”

Thus, we believe we are blessed by God if we have His blessings in our lives and if we do not, we’re probably being disobedient, and we see this is supported in the scriptures.

Now here’s my last starter question for you this morning. Could you tell this about someone just by looking at them? Now, you probably wouldn’t say yes out loud – but the truth is that we do this instinctively as a matter of probability.

If you see a nice car pull into our parking lot, and someone gets out looking fine – nicely dressed, fit and athletic, and when they enter and you greet them you notice they smell nice, they make eye contact and they have a firm handshake, there’s a wedding ring on their finger, and they are well spoken – your first impression of them is going to be very

positive and you would assume that this person shows every indication that they have God’s blessings in their life.

Conversely if you see someone limping up the drive way looking dishevelled and as they walk in and you greet them - they mumble something in response, they don’t look you in the eye, or offer to shake your hand, and they stink a bit... I know we would all assume this person does not show the kind of indicators that reflect God’s blessings in their life.

So, while we would not want to admit that you can determine if someone is blessed by God just by looking at them – in our day-to-day interactions with others we instinctively make these kinds of assumptions based on our first impressions.

And, based on our first impression - or our first reading - of today’s passage in James, you could be forgiven for assuming this passage is all about the dangers of judging others and discriminating against them – especially when they come to church. Christians, ought to treat everyone equally so no one is prevented from hearing the gospel in church!

This is James' way of stating "*don't judge a book by its cover!*" But such an assumption about the message of this passage is in fact "*judging it by its cover*", whereby we project our distaste for discrimination, and our fears of pushing people out of the church, into what James is saying here.

And it doesn't help that the offense which James is prohibiting in vs. 4 by is translated by the NIV as "*discrimination*."

So, let's move beyond first readings and appearances and go deeper into this passage to find out what James' is really talking about here... and more importantly how it can help us better imitate our Heavenly Father in our care and concern for others - because that's the background here.

In chapter two James begins his in-depth expositions of each the three characteristics he introduced us last week; bridling our tongue, visiting widows and orphans, and keeping ourselves unstained by the world. Now we might expect that James would follow the same order in exploring these three characteristics as he did in introducing them to us.

But instead, the second chapter follows up on the second characteristic, visiting widows and orphans in their distress.

And James doesn't give us more examples of God's generosity or going into detailed instructions about caring for widows, like Paul does for Timothy. Rather James grounds the basis of how we must show our care and concern for people in our Lord Jesus Christ, and His glory, and he instructs us that this is basis for which we are to honor people and acknowledge God's blessings in their lives.

So, let's work our way through these verses so you can see how this all plays out. Starting with vs. 1 "*My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.*"

Now if we read this verse in the Greek what would stand out to us is the awkward way in which James uses the word glorious. I will spare you the grammatical details here – but as James addresses the problem of showing favoritism to widows, he wants to highlight the glory of Jesus Christ so it

grabs our attention – wanting us to remember the time Jesus' glory was shown to Peter, the others James, and John.

And showing partiality to widows was a big problem in the early church. Acts 6:1 gives the details *"In those days... the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."* This was a contentious issue! So much so that the solution required the selection of men who were full of the Holy Spirit to take over the food distribution.

Now, sometimes it's best to deal with a contentious issue in an indirect manner – to help people get the point and make the application without directly addressing the issue whereby they will not hear anything because they are all worked up. So, James introduces another scenario... Vs. 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."*

Brothers and sisters what we are to notice about these men is their external appearance, specifically their clothing – and as

we think about the contrast of the fine clothing and filthy old clothes – we should also think about how Jesus' clothes reflected His divine glory and *"became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them."* (Mark 9:2)

So what we are noticing is how their clothes reflect their "glory" as it were –and the question is now how will we honor the glory that we see? Especially as it relates to our opening question of determining if someone is blessed by God.

And this is an appropriate response, in Matt 10:41 Jesus said *"whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person, will receive a righteous person's reward."*

So these men are welcomed and honored accordingly in vs. 3 *"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,"*

The man with fine clothes is honored as a righteous man **because** his external appearance proves God is blessing him,

and he merits God's blessing because he is righteous. Again, if you think I'm stretching this remember Jesus words in Matt 23:6 about the Pharisees *"they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues."*

So, now we see what James is rebuking in vs. 4 is not really *"discrimination"* or *"judging others"* but self-righteousness, and believing God blesses you because of your worthiness. Because vs. 4 states If you do this... *"have you not 'diakrinos-ed' among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"*

Now we've seen the word *"diakrinos"* before, back in 1:6 when James instructs us to pray for the wisdom we lack. James says we must pray without *"diakrinos"* without being *"double-minded"* because if we ask as such... we will not receive from the Lord.

And if you remember, asking for wisdom is tied to the ability to experience God maturing you, completing you through the various trials and challenges of life, one of which is poverty – and which we are to consider as all joy!

So, choosing to honor the man with fine clothes says that you believe he merits God's blessing, and that is being double-minded brothers and sisters.

Not because we are judging or discriminating between two kinds of men – but because we are presuming to judge how God must work in people's lives. Our evil thoughts believe that one man has been blessed because of his obedience to God, evidence his fine clothes, but that the poor man must have disobeyed God resulting in his shabby clothes.

These thoughts are evil brothers and sisters because they are based on self-righteousness. So James moves on to vs. 5 and gently and firmly corrects stating that *"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."*

Brothers and sisters this is how James summarizes Jesus' teaching about the great reversal in the Kingdom of God where the first shall be last and the last shall be first, (Matt 30:16) and where those who exalt themselves will be

humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”
(Luke 14:11)

Who are we to say that he is poor because of disobedience and that God is punishing him and reward the other! That God is not blessing Him through the trials of life?

James has already told us in 1:8 that *“Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.”* And let’s not forget Paul’s encouragement in Romans 8:18 that *“our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the **glory** that will be revealed in us.”*

When Jesus glory was revealed in Him at the transfiguration for the disciples to see, it was not only assuring them of His unseen divine nature, but it’s also a glimpse of what will happen to us at the resurrection, when we are fully perfected and completed. We will be glorified at the return of Christ, when we inherit the Kingdom of Heaven – we just can’t see it right now.

This is what Paul is explaining in 1 Cor 15:42-43 *“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body... is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory...”*

But for now, that reality is invisible, going on inside us, with no way to see it reflected in our external appearance, its a hidden glory, as Paul says in 2 Cor 4:7 *“ we have this treasure (glory) in jars of clay (humble human appearance) to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”*

That’s why James says in vs 6 that by seating the poor man in humble seat *“you have dishonored the poor.”* We have not recognized the great reversal Jesus has brought about, nor the honor that has been bestowed on those who are undeserving, but who have none the less received the honor of Christ’s righteousness – namely ourselves.

And then to add insult to injury in this scenario, the one who is honored for their self-righteousness, is dishonoring the honorable Lord Jesus in how they are treating the believers!

So, vs. 6-7 concludes *“are not the rich exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the honorable name of him to whom you belong?”*

So, James concludes - we could be forgiven for assuming God is blessing someone because their outward appearance seems to indicate it, and thus honoring them as righteous people – there is biblical basis for that, but... when they are known by what they do as unrighteous - how foolish are we to still honor them as righteous people!?

Now the point of this scenario that James creates here, is to confront us the early church with how their words are not matching up with our actions in taking care of the widows, and to challenge them to walk their doctrine, to live out the theology that they confess.

As James has already stated in 1:5 that *“God gives generously to all, without finding fault”* Secondly, and I can’t state it better than Paul does in Rom 8:28 *“we know that in all things*

God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

And thirdly, Eph 2:8-9 *“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.”* And lastly, obedience is our gratitude and loyalty and whatever blessings we receive are further gifts, not rewards!

The early Christians believed this and they confessed this, and if someone had asked them if it was possible to earn their salvation through keeping the Law they would have said no, that’s impossible! Forgiveness of our sin is through faith in Christ’s sacrifice; salvation is given through faith in Christ’ righteousness!

Yet... in how they were going about distributing food to the widows they were confessing belief in self-righteousness and a doctrine of salvation by works, as we like to say, actions speak louder than words. And their actions are inconsistent with their words.

Brothers and sisters, this is why James begins expositing on the three characteristics by focusing on widows and orphans instead of starting with the tongue. It is his way of challenging us to back up what we confess in words through our actions – or as he so famously says later in 2:26 as he concludes this exposition on widows; *“faith without works is dead!”*

So let us pay heed brothers and sisters. As our opening questions revealed we would never come right out and say that someone is not blessed by God simply based on their external appearance. We would never come out and say that we’re blessed because of our obedience and good works... and that’s good – we are bridling our tongues.

But brothers and sisters, James wants us to understand that our actions reveal more than what our tongues do not say, and it usually presents itself in how we imitate God in taking care of those who are poor and needy in the eyes of this world.

Furthermore, we can say that we are loyal to Jesus Christ, but do we see that expressed in our actions in how we care for those who are poor in the eyes of this world, out in the world?

We would be missing the whole point of this scenario if we simply patted ourselves on the back and said *“welp that wouldn’t happen here at Valleyview, we don’t discriminate based on appearance when someone comes to visit us!”*

Brothers and sisters, this is meant to ensure that the important, biblical, foundational truths and doctrines of the Christian faith which willingly confess with our tongues on Sunday... are not contradicted in how we live from Monday to Saturday.

We say we worship Christ, and Christ alone – but is that reflected in how we spend our time, treasure and our talents in our day to day lives – and through consistent weekly participation in worship on Sundays?

We say that we have been forgiven by Christ – but do we extend that forgiveness to others... as eagerly as we want to receive it from the Lord?

We say that we surrender our lives to God to do His will – but do we consult with Him when about our own ambitions and goals or get angry with God when He interrupts them?

We say that we can do nothing to earn our salvation – but do we withhold our charity from the needy because it looks like they are disobeying God and will spend our charity on booze?

Are you hearing how this speaks to us brothers and sisters?

And here's one more for us as a congregation – as a church we say that Jesus left his heavenly glory, and **went out** to find the lost to save them, but do we go out? Or do we stay put and just expect people to come to us on Sundays? Are we putting the doctrine of incarnation into action?

If there's any application for James' rich-man poor-man scenario for us at Valleyview – this would be it!

We should not be so worried about how various kinds of people who come here are received – we've got that down pat! But we ought to be concerned about the people who are not finding their way to us, we should be available for the Holy Spirit to direct us to go out and find them!

They may be your neighbors, they may be your coworkers, they may be your team-mates, your classmates, the people you see at the gym or the grocery store or a stranger on the bus or at the mall or on the street.

Brothers and sisters, be open and ready to be used to share the good news that God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to become rich in faith and to inherit the Kingdom. Maybe it will be someone in financial poverty, and you will have to live what you believe about your own spiritual poverty before God, and you will go and talk to them because you recognize your own need in them.

But its not always about financial poverty – the true poverty God chooses is spiritual poverty and we don't know this about people simply looking at their external appearance. So, when the Holy Spirit nudges you to go talk to someone - don't prejudge if they will or won't receive what you have to say based on their appearance.

Oh, it looks like they have another religion already – I don't want to offend them by talking about Jesus...

Oh, they look pretty cynical and bitter – I don't think they would respond well to the hope and good news that I have to share with them.

Oh, they look like they are well off and successful and very busy – I don't think they would appreciate my interrupting them and telling them that they need forgiveness and salvation.

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that we can't tell if someone is blessed by God just by looking at them, but if we respond in

obedient gratitude to the blessings that we know God has generously given to us – without finding fault - then we can be pretty certain the person the Holy Spirit is nudging us towards is going to be blessed by God, through us.

Were would we be if Christ had not left Heavenly glory behind to come into this world to seek us and save us brothers and sisters.

As the early church needed James' rich-man poor-man scenario to spur them into following the truth of salvation by grace in their care for widows – may this example spur us on to go out and follow the truth of Christ's incarnation to go out to those whom Christ is still seeking and saving.

That's how we show our loyalty to Christ in our relationships brothers and sisters. Amen