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THE CAMPAIGN RIBBON ERROR

James 2:1-13

When I was in college for three summers I had a summer job working for Occidental Petroleum Corporation in Bakersfield as an engineer's aide. If you've seen the movie *Hidden Figures* you know that there was a period in the 1960's when engineers had not yet begun employing electronic computers to perform the sometimes complex calculations that engineering problems involve. So the engineers would set up the problems and the steps for solution, and then they had less trained people plug in different variables and actually perform the math. Those people were the human computers, in fact, they sometimes even called them computers. My job, which I had at the end of that era, was to fulfill a function somewhat like that.

There was a guy named Dave that I met my first summer there and would later get to know pretty well who also worked as an engineer's aide. He was around 6 years older than me. It was a bit surprising that Dave had that job in the engineering department. He grew up in the rural areas around Taft, west of the bright lights of the big city of Bakersfield where I grew up. He was from a blue collar family that had little interest in education. He barely graduated from high school and he never thought about much of anything other than playing guitar in a band in local bars and working in the oil fields. He appeared to have zero aspirations beyond that. Most people figured that the oil fields were as far as he was going to go. It would have been easy to categorize him as a certain kind of person and not give him another thought. In fact, many did. James 2:1-13 warns us against taking that approach.

THEME: DO NOT SHOW FAVORITISM TO THE FAVORITES

James poses a scenario that might occur at their synagogue, which in their case was a church, a gathering of Jewish believers in Jesus. They were a group of Hebrew Christians who were all on the bottom rung of the social and economic ladder. They were mostly dirt poor. They experienced oppression and persecution pretty much on a daily basis. This day as they gathered to worship, in walks a man displaying the obvious signs of wealth and position. He arrives driving a top of the line Tesla, he's wearing as much gaudy bling as an NFL player, he has on a \$1200 pair of custom jeans with \$600 Dolce and Gabbana sneakers, a \$400 Ferragamo shirt and \$700 Tom Ford sunglasses from Neiman Marcus.

As soon as this guy walks into the room people start nudging each other with their elbows and surreptitiously pointing at him as they whisper to each other. “Hey, look who’s here! How cool that he’s here with us!” He obviously is somebody important, a man of wealth and influence. Even though it is very crowded someone ushers him in and they make way for him. They clear out one of the best seats in the house, which in our church would be in the back row. With great deference they say, “We’re so glad to have you with us today. Why don’t you sit here in this seat, it’s the best we have.” They want to make sure he knows how pleased they are that he has graced them with his presence and they want to make him feel welcome and honored. Man, it would be so cool if he decided to join their congregation.

That same day another guy comes into the church, and he could not be more of a contrast to the first man. He is one of the poorest of the poor. His clothes are tattered, patched and dirty, which is a pretty good match for the man himself. He’s not a homeless derelict, he is just another guy who doesn’t have a denarius to his name. Like pretty much the rest of the people in the church he is one more trailer park dwelling piece of food stamp bait. He’s one more nobody. If you’re a non-person you should not be surprised if no one notices you. He gets the reception that he is used to, the one he expects. As he looks around for a place to sit in the crowded room an usher finally notices him and impatiently tells him, “Why don’t you go stand over there by the wall, or maybe just sit on the floor. But don’t sit in the aisle. The fire department requires that we keep them free.”

Why would James pose such a scenario? The most reasonable guess is that it’s because things like that happened among the early Christians. It’s hardly likely that God would inspire James to write about something that was about as common as a unicorn showing up at the zoo. James had to address this because it was something of a problem at times in the early church.

It’s hardly surprising that he would depict such preferential treatment being shown to a man of wealth and influence because that’s how things are everywhere in the human race. Have you been on an airplane recently? It is clear that airlines have either not read the book of James or they are rebellious heathen who openly flaunt their disobedience to God’s command. What happens when that wealthy and influential first class passenger arrives for a flight? “Here, why don’t you board the plane first so the riff-raff don’t get in your way and inconvenience you. Let me show you to your seat, it’s one of the best on the plane.” And indeed it is. It’s wide and luxurious with enough leg room for a giraffe. By contrast, when people like Laurie and me show up they herd us into the plane like cattle. They don’t tell us to

sit on the floor, but if they did that would be something of an upgrade. They shoehorn us into seats perfectly suited for a contortionist. You run the danger of breaking your nose on your knee when you sit in these things. When everyone is on board they pull a curtain across the aisle to screen off the wealthy from the hoi polloi crammed back in steerage, just to make it clear that us nobodies aren't welcome up in Somebody Land. And of course, the 12 of them sitting up there have a restroom all to themselves, while the 180 of us peons in the back have to share 2. Apparently the call of nature is not allowed when you are nothing but a lowly serf. Or at least it is severely rationed.

Ooh, a little bitter, are we, Rick? No. Well, yes. But that's not really the point. Perhaps the first class analogy is not totally fair, but the simple truth is that the rich, the famous, the successful, the so called beautiful people, are treated differently in this world than are those who are poor and insignificant by the world's standards. It happens pretty much everywhere.

Wait a minute, there are some wealthy people in our church, but everyone is welcomed and valued here, not just the rich. That is true, so maybe we're better than those first century believers. Or maybe we aren't, we just have to view it from another angle. James has his scenario to highlight the problem, so I'll suggest one of my own. Instead of just a wealthy person, imagine that famous actor Denzel Washington showed up on Sunday morning at our church. I understand he attends a church up in LA, so what if he happened to be in the area and dropped in to worship with us? Yes, I realize that is only slightly more likely than me getting an offer to play for the Padres, but this is just for the sake of illustration, so use your imagination. Do you think he might be treated just a bit differently than the average person who comes? I am confident that the people in our church would not be obnoxious about it, but there would be some wide eyes and surely someone would ask for an autograph or a picture with the famous actor. He would be given a very warm welcome.

It would not be out of control, but human nature just produces that kind of attitude toward the famous, the powerful, the rich. Many years ago before I was married I was living in the LA area and was serving in a ministry to college students. We had a group of students come out from the Midwest for a ministry trip and some of them stayed with us. One of them was a young guy who had never seen the ocean. His reaction when we took him to the beach and he saw it for the first time was surprising to me. He said, "I thought it would be bigger." What do you say to that? But one thing I thought was interesting was they were a bit starry-eyed. They were in LA, capital of the entertainment industry, and they all hoped that during their

stay they might encounter a celebrity, because isn't almost everybody in LA famous? They seemed disappointed when we told them that we had lived in LA for years, had visited Hollywood and numerous famous landmarks and had not once even caught a glimpse of a Hollywood celebrity. The point is even our Christian friends saw Hollywood celebrities as worthy of more note than other people.

Why would he land on this as a matter of concern? It's a little distasteful the way people fawned over the rich guy and dissed the poor guy, but this doesn't seem like some grievous sin, does it? We all have a tendency to do it to some extent. Why did James think this is such a big problem? He zeroed in on this because underlying it are some huge issues that have to do with our hearts. He identifies them in this section.

IT COMES FROM EVIL MOTIVES

Verse 4 is a deeply convicting verse. When we do something like what James described in his scenario, "have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" Yes, you are judging people. You are discriminating against them, evaluating their worth, their importance. That's a problem right there, but the killer is you're doing it out of evil motives. There is something really ugly underneath your judgments.

What does James mean by that? We get some insight on that from 2 Corinthians 5:15-16. Referring to Jesus Christ Paul wrote, "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer."

Hang on to verse 15 for a moment, for we are going to come back to it. The result of verse 15 is that Paul said in verse 16 we should not regard anyone from a worldly point of view. When we behave as James described in James 2 we are regarding people from a worldly point of view. What does that mean? What is the worldly point of view that he refers to?

That worldly point of view is that people have value because of something they can do, some position they have, something they possess or some way they can benefit us. The worldly view says there is a scale, and we all rank somewhere on that scale. There are many different factors that go into determining where we are on the scale. Actually different people have different scales. There was a time when simply what family you were born to was the primary determining factor. If you were born into a noble or even royal family, then you were at the top of the

scale. If you were born into a family of peons, then you don't even move the needle on the scale, no matter what ability you have or what you might do. You have no value.

In our country that is far less of a factor, though it still exists in some places. But the worldly point of view is as pervasive here as anywhere in the world. There are just other factors involved. In James' story the worldly point of view said the wealthy man has enormous value because he is rich, and the poor man who has nothing doesn't even register on the scale. That point of view exists here. It certainly exists on airplanes, as I said, but it is pervasive in our nation as well. But there are plenty of other factors. How beautiful or sexy are you? How intelligent or educated are you? How successful are you? How talented are you? What kind of prestigious position do you have?

Having a son-in-law that was an officer in the Marines introduced us to a culture we did not know much about. The military is open and frank about their ranking system. When Michael wore his dress uniform it was all declared right before your eyes. What rank do you have? You can see it at a glance. On his chest there were all those medals and odd colored and striped ribbons. To someone who is initiated those things tell you everything about the person. They tell you what accomplishments he has, what skills he possesses, what awards he has won, and every place he has served. In one look you can rank the person on the scale.

I wonder if it would make things easier for all of us if we all adopted that system. "This ribbon represents my college degree in math, and this one is for my masters degree in theology, this one is for years of a happy marriage, these two are for raising a daughter and a son, this one is for surviving a family tragedy, this one is for planting a church, along with this one for planting another church." Maybe it would be a bit complicated, so never mind. But we rank people just as much as the military does. We all do it. We're just more subtle about it. But we are doing it all the time with everyone we meet and know.

You say that like it's a bad thing. Yes it is. If for no other reason, it causes us to judge purely on the outer things. We're judging books by their covers, and that can be a big mistake. Think about my fellow engineer's aide, Dave. He appeared to be a guy who didn't have all that much going for him and that he would never go beyond the oil fields. Most people saw him just that way. After high school he got a job as a roustabout with Standard Oil. He worked in the fields for several years when some exec at Standard Oil came up with a bright idea. I have no idea why, but they decided they should give aptitude tests to all their employees, from top to

bottom. Humble Dave scored higher in intelligence than the suits in the office. So they brought him in to be an engineer's aide. Of course, they saw no further advancement for him. They figured that was his ceiling. He moved over to Occidental, which was where I got to know him. During my first summer there, though I was unaware of it, the company began to introduce a time sharing computer system to the engineering department. Most of the engineers were not especially interested, but it caught Dave's attention. He signed up to take a training course offered by the company and learned computer programming. Toward the end of the summer he created his first program, one designed to do some of the laborious calculations I had been doing. I recall the first time he attempted to run the program. A number of somewhat skeptical engineers gathered to watch this momentous event. They didn't see how this oil field refugee could do something that was supposed to radically alter how things were done. Unfortunately the program crashed and Dave was subjected to considerable razzing. It confirmed the doubts many had. But Dave stayed at it, and before I left to go back to school he had his first proud success. The next summer the landscape had changed dramatically. All Dave did was programming, and the entire engineering department depended on his programs. By that time I had become adept at programming, so I became his partner. The guy was brilliant. Before I graduated from college he was offered a job by another company at much higher pay. The powers that be panicked at this news and pretty much offered him the world. He was given his own department to run. He did that for 10 years, then left and formed his own international company that took him all over the world. He ran that company until 1999 when he retired to his own horse ranch while still in his 50's.

Paul fell prey to making a worldly evaluation when he looked at Jesus. He said in 2 Corinthians 5:16 that he once regarded Christ that way. As an educated rabbi he looked at Jesus and saw an untrained, unsophisticated, blue collar radical rabble-rouser from Podunk, Galilee. This was not someone to be taken seriously, and Paul wrote him off. I love how he ended that verse. "We do so no longer." Yeah that whole resurrection thing kind of changed the picture don't you think?

If you looked at the disciples of Jesus from a worldly point of view what would you have seen? A few hick fishermen, a hated Roman collaborator, a Jewish freedom fighter, and some other random no names. The world would take any notice of them at all. But that collection of nobodies was chosen and used by God to literally change the world!

But there is a much bigger and deeper problem than just making mistakes in how we evaluate people. Remember what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:15. Christ died

for all that we should no longer live for ourselves but for Christ who died for us. Pay attention to the words "no longer." We used to do what everybody does, live for good old number one. Take care of yourself. Be preoccupied with me. That's the human default for all of us. Paul says Christ changed all that. Now we are to no longer live that way. We are to be preoccupied with Jesus and serving him, not with ourselves. Verse 16 begins with the word "so," meaning it is a consequence of verse 15. If we no longer live for self, then we will no longer regard people the way the world does. Do you see what that means? It means the *world's way of evaluating people is about getting something for ourselves!*

It's not too hard to figure out the ulterior motives going on in James' scenario. The poor and powerless believers had to be thinking that having a wealthy man in the church would be much to their advantage. He would be a man of influence and means, and there surely was the possibility that he would use his resources to better their situation in some way.

What happens if a famous person or a very wealthy one goes into a restaurant and is recognized by the staff? Of course he is treated far better than the average bear, because they want to keep the rich guy coming and spending his money. The staff see big dollar signs in their tip future.

We think the world's point of view can be beneficial for us whether we are looking up or down the ranking system. Why do people want so much to get close to a celebrity? Because they feel like that will somehow validate them in some way, make them feel like they're a little more important. Consider the autograph thing. These days there's a money factor that drives some of that, but there's also this thing of, "I was close enough to this person to get his autograph, so somehow that makes me a little more important." I have a program that has an autograph in it. It reads, "Rick, Your friend, Wayne Gretzky, 99." Yeah, Wayne and I are good buds. We go way back. It was nice of him to give me that message since I haven't seen him in a long time. So aren't you impressed that the Great One, the record setting all time leading scorer in the National Hockey League, the best hockey player of all time, is my friend? I actually am somebody, because the Great One wants to be my friend. All right, here's the truth. Gary Martin encountered Gretzky at the Torrey Pines golf tournament because Gretzky's son in law was playing in it, and Gary asked Gretzky to autograph the program for me. Gretzky is not really my friend. In fact he wouldn't know me from Donald Trump. Well, actually he might know me from him because of the hair thing. But my point is he has no idea who I am and doesn't care. But the idea of the autograph thing is it kind of validates me in some way. Laurie and I have some friends who are or used to be somewhat

famous. There is a wearisome aspect to that, and it is people constantly wanting to be their friend. That wouldn't seem bad except they know that desire is driven primarily by their celebrity, not by genuine motives. In other words, there are a lot of people who want to use them for their own personal needs. It takes some effort for them to not be cynical about people.

Underlying this issue is the problem of simply viewing people as having worth based on what they can produce and categorizing them, or of valuing them for what they can do for us. All we need to do is ask what would happen to us if God did that with us. We would end up worthless and on eternity's scrap heap. A godly way of seeing people is to regard each person as having great worth, so much worth that Jesus Christ died for them. We value them not because of what they can do, or especially what they can do for us, but because they bear the image of God, however distorted it might be and God loves them.

IT DEVALUES THOSE WHOM GOD VALUES

James asked in verse 5, "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 to those who love him? Indeed he has. In Matthew 5:3 Jesus started the Sermon on the Mount, preached primarily to the poor, the common people who were not respected and had no influence, "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In Luke 4 Jesus went home to Nazareth and in the synagogue announced his ministry. In verse 18 he read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." In verse 21 he said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He came to preach the good news of the gospel to the poor.

Primarily the poor, the oppressed, the powerless, the people of no significance or influence, were the ones who responded to Jesus. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:26-28, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are."

The Corinthians were kind of a curious bunch. They were definitely in the proud camp. Because of their proximity to Athens, the cradle of Greek philosophy, they wanted to see themselves as wise people, as deep thinkers. They had the Greek philosophy equivalent of Little Dog Syndrome. They were the little dogs and they

wanted to prove that they were big time. Paul had to remind them of who they were. They weren't influential, smart, powerful, noble, wise or wealthy. They were nobodies. They were the foolish things, the things that are not. Paul drove home to them that on the world's measuring scale they were deep on the losing end.

Why did Paul pound that point home to them? Why does God seem to have a fascination with the poor and insignificant? It's because in order to get approval before God, in order to get into his kingdom, you have to start with admitting you've got nothing to boast about and everything to be ashamed of. You only need a Savior if you are helpless and in big time need of saving. No one will ever come to faith in Christ while attempting to prove how great they are.

God is opposed to the proud and gives grace to the humble. That's because pride, which is what the world's point of view of people is all about, is actually the root of all disobedience to God. When we favor the people whom the world favors, the rich, the powerful, the famous, the beautiful, the talented, we automatically disfavor the very people who enter God's kingdom.

IT IS UNLOVING

James says at issue in this matter is whether we keep what he calls in verse 8 "the royal law." That law is "Love your neighbor as yourself." When we show favoritism as James has discussed it we are violating that law. We are not loving people. The truth is, the world's way of valuing people is driven by what they can do for us. In other words, it is about using them, not loving them.

To start with, when we do that we are not loving the person we favor. We communicate to that person that he or she matters more than other people, that they have greater value and importance than others because they are rich, powerful, beautiful or whatever the standard. That encourages them to keep operating by the world's standard because it makes them winners, at least for the moment. Second, it feeds their pride and sense of self, which causes them to have less awareness of their need for God's forgiveness and grace. In other words, our favoring them actually pushes them away from God, and that is the most unloving thing we could do to them.

It is not hard to see that in communicating to the poor person that he or she does not matter we clearly are not loving them. Well known author and pastor, Francis Chan, once talked about this issue and during his talk he brought onto the platform with him a teenaged boy named Ian. When he was an infant Ian suffered a health crisis that damaged his brain. He will never be significant in the eyes of the world.

He is limited in what he can do. He can speak, but not very well, and he is slow to understand things. But Ian loves Jesus with all his heart. At the church on Sundays he would hand out doughnuts, he would hand out bulletins, and he helped out in a class they had for younger special needs kids. The world will never see Ian as significant. If one's value comes from what one can do, especially what one can do for others, Ian has little to no value, and that's exactly how the world sees him. The easiest thing in the world for people to do is to not even see someone like Ian. He becomes invisible, or maybe worse he becomes a problem to be avoided. But God loves Ian so much that he sent his Son to die on a cross for him. God loves Ian's humble heart that trusts in him.

Would you like God to judge you, to evaluate you and your worth, on the same basis that you evaluate others and their worth? I'm pretty sure most of us would not. It is difficult. Everywhere in the world the system is at work. You've been dealing with it all your life. It literally comes naturally for us, as naturally as breathing air. James admonishes us to reject it, and to live in God's value system, applying it to everyone, including ourselves, regardless of what the world thinks.

APPLICATION

DELIBERATELY REJECT THE WORLD'S WAY

This will take a conscious choice, and it will be difficult. That's because the natural way of relating to people is the world's way, and it involves treating them according to the ranking system. You and I do it automatically, unconsciously. We don't have to choose it, it just happens before we even consciously think about it. To not live in the world's way will mean we have to recognize it when we are doing it and choose to reject it. We will need to see it for what it is, self serving and unloving.

One of the things Laurie has to deal with when she gives voice lessons is that most of us sing incorrectly. We strain our vocal chords, don't produce as good a sound as we might, and don't produce much volume. Yet no one thinks about how they sing. They just do what comes naturally, something they've been doing all their lives. To become better at singing students typically have to break old habits and consciously think about breathing properly, using their diaphragm and correctly placing their voice. They have to train themselves to do these things and practice them consciously.

That's kind of what we have to do with how we view and treat people. We just do what comes naturally, and it turns out to be badly wrong. So we have to choose, train and practice new habits.

LIVE FOR THE ONE WHO DIED FOR YOU

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:15 that Christ died for us so that we might no longer live for ourselves, but for him who died for us. That is a radical way to live. That means that I don't relate to people in ways that will make me feel good, will make me feel happy, will promote me and my agenda for my life. The way I relate to them is to love them like Jesus loved me, regardless of who they are. It is to refuse to use them for my benefit. It is to make sure that what is most important is that I live for Christ in the way I treat people.

ASK CHRIST TO GIVE YOU HIS LENS

The Brooklyn Tabernacle church lost four of its members in the terrorist attacks on September 11. One of them was a police officer. Jim Cymbala, the pastor of that church, says he was profoundly impacted by the words of New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani when he spoke at that officer's funeral. The mayor talked about what he had learned from that horrific event. He said, "When everybody was fleeing that building, and the cops and the firefighters and the EMS people were heading up into it, do you think any of them said, 'I wonder how many blacks there are up there for us to save? I wonder what percentage are whites up there? Let's see, are these people making \$400,000 a year or \$24,000?' No, when you're saving lives, they're all precious. And that's how we're supposed to live all the time. How would you want the cops to treat you if you were on the 75th floor that day? Would you want them to say, 'Excuse me, but I've got to get the bosses out first'? I'm convinced that God...wants us to value every human life the way he does."

The mayor was correct. When Jesus was on the cross he wasn't thinking, "Okay, I'll do this for everyone who makes enough money or has a college degree." He died for all. He didn't go to the cross for those who are deserving, for none of us deserve what he did for us.

In Luke 19 as Jesus was nearing Jerusalem he came to the town of Jericho. He planned to stop there for a night and have an evangelistic banquet. Do you know who he chose to host the event? It was a man named Zaccheus, and he was the most hated man in town. The only people who would have anything to do with him were a few low life's like him. Everyone else despised him. They hated him. Jesus picked him out purposefully. He didn't see him as a vomit-provoking waste of DNA like everyone else did. He saw him as a human being created in the image of God, one desperately in need of grace.

When you are saving lives, they're all precious. We need to ask God to enable us to see them as precious, to look past the facade that we all put up, and to see each and every one as a person in the image of God for him Jesus was willing to be executed. These days our nation seems more splintered and divided than ever. A big factor in that is people living by the world's way of thinking, which ends up pitting people and groups against each other. Only God's system, grounded in the cross of Christ, can break down the walls.

Actress Reese Witherspoon says, "I go to church most Sundays with my kids. For me, where I'm at in my career, so many people want to put you in a place that you're not real and treat you like you're not real. For me it's a great experience of grounding, and I stand next to people who have nothing and who have everything, and we all treat each other the same, because we all are the same." That's how the body of Christ should be.

TRUST IN CHRIST'S SUFFICIENCY

We fall into the trap of using the world's ranking system because we are trying to get something. We are trying to feel good about ourselves and maybe raise our own personal rank a bit.

Trust that what God supplies is enough. Trust that what I have in Christ, the value and standing I have before him, is all I need. We need to recognize that the opinions of others cannot improve on that by even a millimeter. We need to trust that God will take care of us.

You know, I have to admit it would be really cool if Wayne Gretzky really were my friend. I'd love for him to be interviewed on TV at the golf tournament and say, "I love coming to this tournament because it gives me a chance to see my good friend, Rick, who lives near here." But here's the crucial point. Jesus Christ, the Lord of all, the beginning and the end, calls me his friend. And that's immeasurably more important. In the end what Wayne Gretzky thinks doesn't matter, and what Jesus Christ thinks is all that matters. I matter, not because of anything I am or do, not because of who I am a friend of, but because I matter to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we need to ask him to help us reject the world's ways, to create new habits, to train us how to regard people and love people the way he loves us. We need to ask him for that continually.