

Making Distinctions

COMMUNION

September 5, 2021

James 2:1-10

¹ My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ² For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³ and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷ Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸ You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁹ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape

notice, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."



As you arrived at church this morning and saw me dressed this way, what were your first thoughts? They may have ranged from 'Is today camp Sunday?' to

'Umm... Pastor is going a little casual this morning' to 'What is he up to now?'

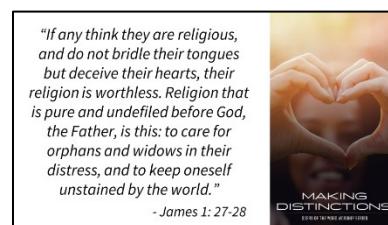
When we think about something as simple as appearances, we often jump to conclusions or we make assumptions, don't we? This morning's message is entitled "Making Distinctions" so if thought 'What is he up to now?', you were right! As we begin this morning, let us pray...

Our passage from last week ended with these words:

"If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is

worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." As we begin this morning, we begin by reflecting on these words.

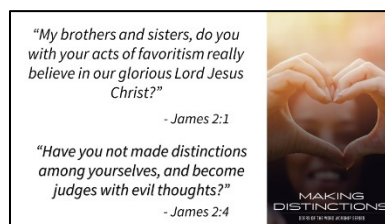
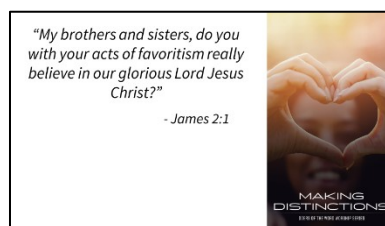
Since last Sunday, have you been more cognizant of bridling your tongue, of being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger? In this past week have you tried to be more aware of what you allowed into your heart in an effort to remain pure and undefiled before God? As we learned last week, the reality is that what we allow into our heart is often when ends up coming out of our mouth. If we fill our hearts with evil thoughts and intentions, then we tend to speak and act in ways displeasing to God. But if we instead chose to fill our hearts with the things of God, then we will tend to speak and act in ways that are pleasing to God and that build up the community and the kingdom of God.



The main challenge to always speaking and acting in pure and undefiled ways is that this is not the model we most often see in the world today. Our culture and society have long taught us to value people based on outward appearances and on other arbitrary things such as wealth or popularity.

We have been taught to judge a book by its cover, so to speak. This applies to how we dress, to what ethnic or social group we appear to belong to, to where we live in town, to the places or ways that we spend our free time, and to a host of other categories and labels. We have been taught to make distinctions quickly and summarily. Sadly, the church is not immune to such practices. For example, a hypothetical question: Who are you happier to see come through your door? The ones who can help you pay the bills or the ones who might appear to have little to offer at first glance? Our answers to this line of questioning then, at least in part, comes back to who are we really looking out for? And, of course, it could impact who we are willing to engage and be invitational towards.

Turn with me to James 2, verse 1, as we apply our passage today to this idea of making distinctions. In this verse James writes, *"My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"* When we smile when certain people walk through the door, those wearing the gold rings and fine clothes, and when we frown when the 'person in dirty clothes' comes through the door, are we not betraying our belief in the Lord? When we invite the one in fine clothes to come and sit by us during church or to join us for coffee and a cookie after church but ignore the one who is poor, *"have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?"* When we offer one person or group of people preferential treatment over another person or group of people, we have allowed the world and not our faith to determine our actions and words.

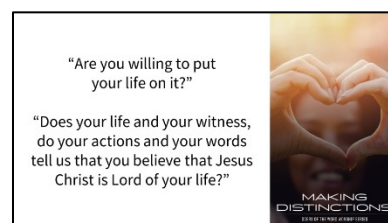


Connecting into one of last week's main ideas, in verse five James asks us, *"Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?"* He is drawing us towards the heart of God, towards the passions of God, towards the least and the lost. Put another way, James is asking us, is it all about the inward focus of the church or is it all about the outward mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world? What is the goal, the focus, the aim of our church? This will be what we delve into on September 11th as we gather for the "Values Training Workshop" here at the church.



James was concerned with how the world was seeing the church. He was concerned because of what the world could observe of the church, that they could see that the focus was inward. As it was with the church then, it is with us today. With our acts, the world can see what we really believe. We can say we believe all kinds of things, but our lives will bear witness to our beliefs, says James.

When we talk about what we believe today, in many circles "believe" really means *intellectual assent... fact... truth...* That is how the world evaluates belief. From that perspective, the world outside isn't really asking, "Do you believe?" The non-believer, the doubter, the skeptic, they want proof that faith affects our lives. In James' day the questions were, "Are you willing to put your life on it?" "Does your life and your witness, do your actions and your words tell us that you believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of your life?"



That's what it meant to believe in the early church. While we do not face the persecution and threats that the first believers faced, we too must live in these terms. Our question is this: from the outsider's viewpoint, are we living totally committed to our faith in Jesus Christ or are we just talking the talk?

At the heart of believing is how we view and then treat others. Turn with me to Mark 7 to take in a couple of examples of when and how Jesus chose not to make distinctions based on the common prejudices of the day. As we return to Mark this week, Jesus travels north to the region of Canaan or Phoenicia, to the city of Tyre. Once here we see that Jesus goes to a house, hoping to remain under cover. However, the people catch wind that Jesus is there. No rest for the weary. These Gentiles have heard of Jesus' teachings and miracles. Scholars believe that some people from Tyre and nearby Sidon had probably traveled to see and possibly to be healed by Jesus. This is foretold in Isaiah 11, verse ten, where we read: *"And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek him, and his resting place shall be glorious."* This day is one of those days. Jesus, the root of Jesse, has come and he will stand as a banner of healing and hope. The Gentiles do seek him.



If Jesus were ever anywhere where he could find peace and rest, it would be in the land of the Gentiles. Yet, in verses 25 and 26 we read, *"But a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin."* She was an outsider to Jesus and the disciples.

Even so, the woman begged Jesus to free her daughter from the demon that possessed her. But in response Jesus says, *"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."* Ouch. Today we would say something like, 'Who let them in here?' or 'What do they think they are doing walking into the church?' Jesus is calling her a dog, using the common slang term that the Jews used to describe the Gentiles. Undeterred the woman says to the teachers, *"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* Yes, Jesus, you can call me a dog. Yes, Jesus, you can tell me that I do not deserve a place at your table. Yes, Jesus, you can reveal your prejudices and your dislike of me and my people. But my daughter needs your healing touch. My daughter needs to be made well. And in response to her words of truth, to her words of faith, to the woman's love of her daughter, Jesus heals the child.



In the second half of the passage from Mark 7, Jesus again heals someone who was usually on the outside looking in. Just as Jesus had been moved by the woman's love of her daughter and by her trust in his power, he is again moved away from making distinctions. Moving through Sidon, Jesus goes on to the region of the Decapolis, a league of ten cities united against Israel. There a deaf beggar with a speech impediment is brought to Jesus. Those who had brought the man to Jesus beg for his healing touch. Instead of seeing this man as less than, as an outcast, as one unworthy of his time, Jesus takes the man aside and heals the man completely.



All of the men's friends are astounded beyond measure, saying, *"He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."*

Doing everything well. Living well in the community. Sharing our faith with others in ways that make tangible differences in people's lives and in the world. Looking beyond the barriers and distinctions that the world creates and seeing the person standing in front of us, being quick to listen, hearing their story, understanding how we can best minister to them. Returning to James 2, he instructs us in verse eight. Here he says, *"You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

When we truly love our neighbors as ourselves, we will not make distinctions and we will not give preferential treatment to one over another in our churches or in our lives. Fundamentally, when we do so, we are claiming that these "others" are not as worthy of God's grace as we are or that they are not as deserving of a place at the table as we are. Perhaps we look at the children in the foster care system in this way. It makes it easier for us to pretend that they are 'invisible', off of our radar screens. But they are there. Please turn your attention to the screens to learn a little bit more.

[Play video: "Worthy of Belonging" (2:00)]



400,000 children in the foster care system nationwide. There are over 1,700 children currently in the foster care system in South Dakota, with about 400 children in our

immediate area. In the video the young lady spoke of the need for more families to be involved. In our area there are just over 80 families that provide foster care. With almost 400 children in the foster care system that would be about five foster children for each family. That would be overwhelming as many of the families that offer foster care also have children of their own. So, there is a huge need in our area. As we consider God's call to care for the vulnerable in our communities, may we each be open to the Holy Spirit's guidance. Then, through prayer, may pray for these children and may we seek to be used by God in whatever way we can be to help all children know that they belong and are loved. There are many ways to be involved. Please let me know if you would like to know more.

As a community of faith, we certainly need to be in prayer for those who are hurting and for the vulnerable, for the suffering and the grieving, and for all who need to come to know the Lord. Prayer is certainly where we must begin as followers of Jesus Christ. But to believe that praying always relieves us of a responsibility to act is not adequate to the gospel we claim to believe. Much of the time our faith should lead us to action.

To summarize our passages today, James is saying that true faith has to manifest itself in our words and in our deeds. Faith isn't just about what resides in our heads but what comes out through our mouths and our hands and our feet. For James, the revelation of our faith must be to all people, not just to those like us. He calls us beyond our habit of making distinctions to seeing as God sees instead. In the end, Jesus modeled that in our passage from Mark 7 – seeing the need before him, working through the distinctions and barriers that

he felt within himself, Jesus went into action, bringing healing to the young child and to the deaf man. Jesus modeled what it looks like to see and hear the person in need before us, allowing the Spirit to guide the encounter.

As we continue together on this journey of faith may we too be led by the Spirit, living our faith well as we seek to be doers of the word. As we do so this week, will there be one of those days – the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to one who needs his touch? May it be so as you and for me as we seek to be doers of the word, transforming ourselves and those we meet. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When have you allowed the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you past a barrier or distinction, leading to an opportunity to minister to another?
- 2) *Pray*. How is the Spirit stirring in you as you consider the plight of many of the children in our local area? Spend some time in prayer this week.
- 3) *Study*. Read James 2:14-17. When have you been guilty of doing what James is speaking about in this passage? How can you move past simply offering words and into action?