

"Stop Labeling, Start Loving"

James 2:1-26

Series: Faith that Works Week 3

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Microphones can be a dangerous thing. Especially if you forget you have one on. Just about everyone who leads Worship can remember a time when they headed to the rest room forgetting their mike was still Live. Thankfully our amazing tech team is quick on the mute button!

What would you think if JUST before today's service started, you heard me on a hot mike saying, "Wow I really LOVE seeing so many people wearing their Eagles green today. But did you see that idiot Jimmy Balmer wearing a Cowboys jersey? I heard he loves them so much he's moving back to Texas." And then I proceeded to give a message on judging and labeling and showing favoritism. You might say I have a slight credibility problem!

James, the brother of Jesus and the author of the letter we're studying, cautions people who decide to follow Jesus to take that commitment seriously -- to put their faith in action. James says a faith that is not demonstrated by loving acts is one that stands on shaky ground. So if you're ready to trust in Jesus -- or you already have -- be ready to show it by the way you live. If we truly are followers of Jesus, we can't have a credibility problem, our behavior must reflect our Savior.

So far in our James: Faith that Works series we've dug into Chapter 1 -- looking at the role faith plays in help us face our fears and get through trials, and how we need to act on what God reveals to us. James packs a lot of wisdom and practical advice for living in his letter to the early Jewish believers. Chapter 2 opens with the story of two men who come into a meeting -- the early equivalent of our Classic Worship service. One gets out of a BMW, looking fine. The other stumbles out of his old beat-up van, looking and smelling a little not fine. The ushers quickly size up the two men and rush to warmly greet Mr. BMW and find him a nice comfortable seat right up front. "Wonder who this new visitor is," they ask each other admiringly. But Van Man -- the one whose odor precedes him -- still needs a seat. The ushers look at each other questioning - no one wants to be the one who has to seat this guy. Finally, the head usher gestures to a seat in the back. Last row, far side, minimizing the chance of any smell wafting over. James or Coach Jim as we've been calling him, tells us in no uncertain terms this is WRONG "If 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," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? James 2: 1-4 (paraphrased). Judges with evil thoughts. Wow.

Too often we make assumptions about people based on external, worldly things like appearance, money, status, job, fame, popularity, etc. Things society deems important. That is NOT the lens God uses. Last week Pastor Doug spoke about denial -- a mirror scrimmage. When we don't act on the things God reveals to us in the mirror of his Word -- things we need to change, destructive habits we need to break. This week we need a magnifying glass to turn outward and look deeper -- past what we see on the outside, past our surface judgments/opinions to see what God sees.

After God rejects Saul as the King of Israel, God sends Samuel to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem to find a new king for the Israelites. Samuel meets Jesse's first son Eliab. Impressed by his appearance, Samuel is delighted, "Here is one tall and strong, surely it must be him." But God says Nope, "Do not consider his appearance or his height for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." God went on to reject seven of Jesse's very fine sons. Finally the youngest boy -- the lowliest, the one who had been out tending the sheep so his brothers could answer the royal command -- comes in from the fields. God looks past the surface and chooses David who goes on to become the greatest King Israel would ever have. God calls him a "man after his own heart," not because he was perfect - he certainly wasn't, but because he had a heart that trusted and loved God.

Back at church, Mr. Van Man sits gratefully - glad to be off his feet after his 16 hour shift working for the sanitation department. Normally he only works 12 hours, but it's almost Christmas and he offered to cover for Bob so he could get home to his wife and kids. He really should have gone home to change, but he knew if he did, he'd miss the last Christmas Eve service and he was determined he'd make it this year. He had so much to be grateful for -- after all Jesus saved his life.

Meanwhile, Mr. BMW drums his fingers on the front pew impatiently. He waves nonchalantly at his parents back a few rows. Their ridiculous Christmas wish for him to join them in church is the ONLY reason he is there. Easy gift - check! Ha -- he not only made it; he has a better seat than them. Geez, he hopes they don't pass the basket for an offering. He needs all his money for holiday celebrating! His friends are waiting for him at Parks Casino! He's feeling lucky tonight! Wow. Boy were those ushers wrong. And I bet most of us.

Why do we rush to judge, basing opinions on surface things? The Bible tells us "God is the only just judge." Psalm 7:11a. Do we think God needs our HELP with judging? When we decide to "play God" by judging, we limit God and his power in our lives. Instead we fall under the power and limitations of the worldly assumptions we create by judging. Like falling for Mr. BMW.

James also tells us to Quit Comparing: "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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 those who love him? Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?"

Why did those Christians reject the poor and run after the rich? Why do we? We compare ourselves to others based on the world's standards. We deem someone rich/poor, cool/uncool, desirable/less than and we compare ourselves - where do we fit in? And we chase after those we see as the top -- based on the size of the house or make of the car they drive, their carefully touched up appearance or Instagram following or... Once again, surface things. The sad truth, according to James, is that the wealthy popular people those early Christians admired and emulated were the same ones harassing and hurting them. The rich used them, sued them, and slandered the very name of Jesus. What was inside of these rich influential people was NOT worthy of emulating.

Who are you chasing after? Who do you emulate? Sports Superstars? Celebrities? Until the latest scandal reveals their true personality and it isn't pretty. Sometimes I find myself sadly disappointed when I find out this celebrity cheated or that celebrity is actually really rude to the people around them. Did I honestly think that their fame or their fortune make them worth following? Comparisons are our feeble attempts to give ourselves a relative value and worth, control, a feeling of power. I'm worthwhile because I'm above those people and I need to work harder to get up with these people. It's exhausting. "Comparison is the thief of joy," is an adage attributed to President Theodore Roosevelt. When we compare ourselves to others, we are left with feelings of inferiority - I'm less than -- or superiority -- I'm better than -- and neither bring us true joy.

A few Sundays ago we looked at the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is a feeling -- we might feel happy when we get more likes than our friend on our FB post. But it's fleeting -- tomorrow we'll feel deflated when someone else has more likes. True joy is lasting -- it comes from knowing God, feeling confident in his unconditional love and then showing that kind of love to others, which leads James to his next point,

Stop labeling, Start loving. Here's what James 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, if you limit who your neighbor is, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' also said, 'You shall not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker." James 2: 6-11.

What is James saying here? I feel pretty confident I haven't come close to murdering anyone. So why does James use such an extreme example? He's probably thinking about what his big brother Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca' (an Arabic term of great contempt) is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell. (Matthew 5:21-22). Name-calling on par with MURDER?

Every act of aggression, destruction and ethnic cleansing begins with labeling and name-calling. In his book, *Less Than Human*, Professor David Livingstone Smith states that it all starts with one crucial ingredient—the dehumanization of the victims. Smith says: "Thinking about your enemies in subhuman categories is a way of creating mental distance, of excluding them from the human family. It makes murder not just permissive but obligatory. We **should** kill vermin or predators." American settlers called Native Americans "savage beasts." The Nazis depicted Jewish people as "rats." The Japanese invaders of China called their victims "chancorro," which means a bug or animal. Prior to the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the Hutus who killed Tutsis routinely referred to them as "cockroaches." When we slap a dehumanizing label on people, it's much easier to strip them of their dignity and destroy them.²

Our name-calling might not approach that level of hatred, but it still can do great damage. If you grow up hearing yourself called names like Idiot, Moron, Stupid it is hard to shake those feelings. Remember the old saying - “Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me.” Not true. Any middle school student experiencing name-calling will tell you that these kinds of tormenting labels most certainly cause damage—whether they sting in the moment or stick around to stain your reputation later. Being labeled a “freak” or a “fatty” or a “sleaze” by other students is no laughing matter.

When I was in my pre-teen pudgy years, my dad changed my nickname from “Skinny Linny” to “Big Bertha.” No, my middle name was not Bertha -- I have no idea where that came from. I don’t think my dad was trying to be mean or make me feel bad, he was probably dealing with his own feelings of awkwardness seeing his daughter mature. And then the “funny nickname” caught on with my younger cousins who thought it was hilarious to call their older cousin “Big Bertha.” I was not laughing. And guess what - who did that awkward teenage girl see when she looked in the mirror?

Instead of judging or labeling or name calling, James tells us to simply “love our neighbors as ourselves.” Who is our neighbor? The Bible teaches us whoever we meet or see today is our neighbor. Whoever we can help is our neighbor. Whoever we can love with the love that God has shown us, is our neighbor. As far as Jesus is concerned, everyone is our equal, everyone is our neighbor, everyone deserves our love.

How can we love our neighbors? Start right on your street -- out walking your dog? Bring up the trashcan for a neighbor you know works long hours. When you’re headed to the store, offer to pick up groceries for the neighbor who has trouble getting out. Or pick the seat next to the kid on the bus who always sits alone and ask them their name.

Want an easy way to start right now? Join us after the 10:30 service today, pack Operation Christmas Child boxes and help children around the world know that they are loved and prayed for. Join Woodside November 12 and 13 when we pack 40k vegetable Seed Packets, to provide a sustainable food supply for our neighbors across the globe. Or help provide a warm meal and safe bed to our neighbors in need right here in Bucks County by volunteering for our monthly Dinner Ministry or Code Blue. You can find other service opportunities on our website.

James ends this section of his letter saying, “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.” Can you imagine if we were judged as to what we truly deserved? That gives me a pit in my stomach. Because of the faithful love of God; because of Jesus we are shown mercy. God came to the world in the form of his son Jesus to set us free once and for all. With the mercy we have been shown, we are to show others. Look past the surface to the heart that God sees, resist judging or labeling and love like Jesus.

My family and I came to Woodside in about 2006 when our kids were elementary and middle school age. I remember walking down the Sunday School hallway one morning and hearing a child screaming. Not just crying, but screaming at the top of his lungs. “Geesh,” I thought, “Can’t people teach their kids how to behave at church.” Now that **her** kids were passed the screaming age, Judy Linda, let’s call her JL for short, conveniently forgot how many times their screaming had echoed in the hallways or how the weekly pew skirmishes had

bordered on turning nuclear. As I walked by wafting an air of smug superiority, I glanced over at the family and saw a calm mom patiently dealing with a very upset son with special needs. “Oh geez I thought.” And here I am judging. Not cool JL; not cool.

About five years later God brought that mom and I together when we both served as leaders on the Sr. High Mission Trip. We became fast friends and I got to see first hand how Kami parented her special needs son with patience, strength and grace. And soon the “Special Needs” label fell away -- I saw just a young man with talents, strong opinions and an INCREDIBLE love of Jesus. Jeffrey Schaal. I marvel at how Jeffrey really sees people. Back when he was younger, at our Higher Ground Worship services, I noticed how he’d scan the room, giving a small hi to many, clearly looking for someone. When he’d find that person, he’d go over, give them a hug and sit with them. Funny, I noticed it was often someone who just looked like they needed a little extra love. Our Woodside family also looked past any limiting labels -- Jeffrey was a regular in Sunday school, youth group and the Higher Ground Band. Now Jeffrey rocks out with both the High Ground and Celebration Bands, just another guitar-playing member of the band. There he is playing his guitar and jamming with Pastor Doug. I love when he looks out at the congregation, imploring all of us to do what he does naturally - raise our hands in worship to our King. Jeffrey lives out his faith every single day.

There is nothing like seeing the pure love and joy of Jesus shining on Jeffrey’s face as he Worships. It touches me deeply, reminding me of the simple powerful truth we are called to. Love God. Love others. No labels.